

— INSIDE *the* DANGEROUS RISE *of the* ANTI-VAXXERS —

Rolling Stone

MARCH 2021 • ISSUE 1349

WOMEN
SHAPING
the FUTURE

The Cosmic Journey of Kacey Musgraves

— PLUS —

Keisha Lance
Bottoms

Julia Garner

Jada Pinkett Smith

Kim Ng

Chloe x Halle

Karol G

Koffee

And More



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ISSUE 1349

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THAT FITS'

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& RENEGADES



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Kacey Musgraves photographed in Nashville on January 15th, 2021, by **Ryan McGinley**.
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Editor's Letter

"A lot of us walk around hiding the things we're too scared to confront. Last year taught people that if we don't deal with it now, we never get the chance to deal with it." —CYNTHIA ERIVO, page 24

A Time of Reflection



"BE STEADY. STAY FOCUSED. Remember your purpose. And always press forward." This was journalist Yamiche Alcindor's tweet after going toe-to-toe with President Trump in the White House press room. The women in this year's "Women Shaping the Future" issue have much to teach us about persistence, grit, and the power of staying true to yourself. Amid the unprecedented challenges of 2020, many of them found a path to their best work. Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms' leadership through a tumultuous year of pandemic and protest have made her a rising star in the Democratic Party. Meanwhile, many of the artists and musicians we spoke to took time during isolation to reflect and go deeper than ever with their craft. "It's been a spiritual kind of year," says the rising reggae star Koffee, who took piano lessons and released new music, including her upbeat jam "Lockdown."

For our March cover star, crossover country singer Kacey Musgraves, these unexpected months of contemplation have been a gift, she says, a chance to slow down after years of the 2018 Grammy winner moving at full speed. Musgraves talked to senior writer Alex Morris about her upcoming album and the deep, personal journey she's been on — with a little help from a guided psychedelic mushroom trip that was like "10 years of therapy in one sitting" — in the wake of her divorce. "I've been doing a lot of reflecting on growing up as a woman in the South," Musgraves says. "We were told to please, to make this person happy. . . . So I'm trying to examine things that may not be useful anymore and maybe unlearn some things."

Throughout the issue, you'll find women who are rewriting the stories we've been told about ourselves and our world. Garrett Bradley found a stunningly personal way to address the devastation of mass incarceration in her documentary *Time*. Marielle Heller has become one of Hollywood's most in-demand directors through sheer confidence in her own vision — by being unafraid to shoot down pitches even from the great Tom Hanks. And *Pen15* co-creators Anna Konkle and Maya Erskine turned the repressed shame of adolescence into a radical work of humor and pathos, exposing their own deepest, darkest secrets so that we could all laugh and cry in relief along with them.

We also asked some of music's most innovative female artists to tell us about the women who've inspired and taught them the most, in our "Icons and Influences" feature. The Haim sisters recall their mom introducing them to Joni Mitchell's *Miles of Aisles* when they were kids. Brandi Carlile looks back on her "origins as a little baby lesbian who was obsessed with the Indigo Girls." Sister R&B duo Chloe x Halle reveal the defining advice their mentor Beyoncé taught them: "It's OK to be yourself, wholeheartedly. Shine. Be yourself. Be free with it. Because she has done that, she has made us believe that we could do that." The women of this issue are doing the same for us all.

ALISON WEINFLASH
MANAGING EDITOR

GOT A HOT NEWS TIP?

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Email us, confidentially, at Tips@RollingStone.com



Resisting immunity

INSIDE THE STORY

How Anti-Vaxxers Collided With QAnon

In the pandemic era, misinformation is one of the nation's biggest public-health threats

WHEN TIM DICKINSON began reporting on how the vaccine-resistance movement came to intersect with the far-right conspiracy group QAnon, he realized why both have attracted so many: They're appealing. "What we all underestimate is the seductive nature of this kind of thinking," says Dickinson. "The ways that conspiracy theories create order out of chaos is actually quite calming, even as they push adherents into dangerous beliefs and behaviors." As the movements threaten to prevent the U.S. from achieving herd immunity, Dickinson spoke to academics who have spent their careers attempting to understand conspiratorial thinking: "Their unheralded field of study is suddenly critical and urgent."



Venues remain empty.

PHILANTHROPY

How to Help Struggling Music-Industry Workers

TENS OF THOUSANDS of musicians and touring professionals face another year without the backbone of their livelihoods: live shows. To help these workers, who are more likely to fall through the cracks of traditional forms of aid, we published on ROLLING STONE's website a guide to 20-plus charities seeking donations. These charities, like the Louis Armstrong Foundation, which launched a \$1 million relief fund for freelance jazz musicians last year, provide direct emergency aid or crucial advocacy resources to musicians. Jazz legend and foundation president Wynton Marsalis said, "The jazz community is devastated. We are doing what we know 'Pops' would do."



“Love running to her tunes on repeat — banging bass, funky guitars. Just got the vinyl LP in the mail, too. I love the cover!”

—Jayson Reynoso, via Facebook



The Price of a Forever War in Afghanistan

This depressing long read [“Highway to Hell,” RS 1348] highlights all that is so distressing about the current state of play in Afghanistan: an emboldened Taliban, besieged Afghan forces, civilians caught in the middle, and the poverty of U.S. policy. And no clear way forward.

—Michael Kugelman, via Twitter

What an inspiring story of the bravery of a 27-year-old female Afghan mayor, working in spite of multiple assassination attempts and the soldiers losing the war against the Taliban.

—David Savage, via Twitter

Dua Lipa Dances Through the Dark

When Dua Lipa released her sophomore album last March, the pandemic era was only just beginning. The pop star’s modern disco bops hardly matched the mood of the times, yet ended up being exactly what we needed to get through the dark days of isolation. For our February issue, Lipa appeared on the cover — photographed by David LaChapelle — and opened up to senior writer Alex Morris on how she followed her vision to come out on top, even when it meant going against the grain [“Dancing in the Dark,” RS 1348]. ROLLING STONE readers responded. “Thank you so much for this lovely interview,”

wrote Ryan Bayne. “This photo is giving me a *Xena: Warrior Princess*-meets-Cher high-femme vibe,” tweeted Alex Berg. “I like it.” Victor Arellano was also drawn to LaChapelle’s work: “Amazing outfits! Love the photos.” Others reflected on the pop star’s rise. “She’s an icon, she’s a legend, and now she is the moment,” wrote Munroe Bergdorf. “She saved pop music for 2020,” Claude Chiasson said. After Lipa’s groundbreaking year, many are waiting to see what she will do next. “I think she is an interesting artist,” wrote Mike Gallivan. “I’m looking forward to what direction she takes going forward.”



@hstbutterfly:
Just thinking about Dua Lipa’s ROLLING STONE photoshoot...



Artists to Watch in 2021

I’d never heard Olivia Kaplan’s music prior to this article [“Artists to Watch,” RS 1348]. Now I’m waiting — impatiently — for her full album. Her songs are somehow soothing and emotionally wrenching at the same time.

—Lena Oliver, via letter

These profiles found me right when I needed fresh voices on my playlists. As a country-music fan, I’m especially excited about Teddy Swims. I love the way he shape-shifts through genres.

—Paula Amato, via letter

TRIBUTE

The Everlasting Legacy of Neil Peart

For the first time since Neil Peart’s passing in January 2020, his bandmates and widow discussed the Rush drummer’s legacy and final years. Senior writer Brian Hiatt’s moving tribute [“The Spirit of Neil Peart,” RS 1348] inspired responses from readers. “I don’t usually cry reading an article, but this one moved me to tears,” wrote Barry Short. “It’s still hard to believe that Neil Peart is gone over a year later.” Chris Stamper tweeted, “Such a beautiful tribute to the best drummer to ever play the instrument.” William Kaminski shared: “Outstanding work. Rush provided the soundtrack of my life and influenced me deeply as a person. Thank you.”



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The Mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT'S NUTS

Kehlani's New Vision

She helped reimagine modern R&B while navigating major heartache. After getting sober, she's got brighter music on the way



HAIR BY CESAR DELEON RAMIREZ FOR CROWDMGMT; MAKEUP BY PATRICK TA FOR PATRICK TA BEAUTY; STYLED BY SCOT LOUIE FOR THE WALL GROUP

PHOTOGRAPHS BY Erica Hernandez | 13

→ KEHLANI

ONE MORNING early this year, Kehlani decided to look up the tarot card she'd be aligning with in 2021. It's a numerology practice: You add up your birthday with the year, then you add the digits of that new number. She got the number six, the placement of the lovers card in the tarot deck. "The lovers card is all about developing meaningful relationships, whether that be romantic or familial or community-based," she says, calling from her new home in Simi Valley, California. "I really like that one. I'm on that path already."

That path has at times been rocky for the singer. Born in Oakland, Kehlani Parrish's upbringing was marred by drug addiction, which put her mom in prison, and gang violence, which took her dad's life when she was young. Kehlani showed an early talent for performance, studying dance in school, and eventually singing. As a teenager, she joined a cover band called PopLife, which placed fourth on *America's Got Talent*. The band didn't make it very far, but after leaving the group, she started releasing music by herself through SoundCloud.

Kehlani's first two mixtapes, 2014's *Cloud 19* and 2015's *You Should Be Here*, established her as one of the leaders of a new class of singers who blurred the lines between pop, hip-hop, and R&B. She released her more pop-leaning debut album, *SweetSexySavage*, in 2017, but it was her 2019 mixtape *While We Wait*, written and recorded while pregnant with her daughter, Adeya, that would display the depths of her talents as a songwriter. Kehlani has a knack for giving coherence to the messiness that is dating and growing up in the public eye.

And that gift for making sense of chaos was about to be put to the test. Kehlani's life after welcoming Adeya was a whirlwind of tragedy. She describes the beginning of last year as "heavy," which feels generous. Within a three-month span, she lost two close friends – Philly rapper Chynna and Minnesota rapper Lexii Alijai – to overdoses. Meanwhile, her relationship with Compton rapper YG was going through a very public implosion. Kehlani channeled it all into last year's *It Was Good Until It Wasn't*, her best project yet, a provocative, self-reflective, and emotionally mature collection that had her unpacking all the death, heartbreak, and hard-earned lessons of her past 25 years. "I was in



Kehlani in January

FAST FACT

ON THE ROAD... EVENTUALLY

Kehlani, who was supposed to open for Justin Bieber this year, hasn't toured since before her daughter was born. When she finally hits the road, she'll be bringing three projects she's never performed live.

a crazy relationship," she says. "I was in toxic situations. I was drinking a lot. There's several mentions of tequila."

Kehlani stopped drinking over the summer, and now lives completely sober: "I'm very boring and grounded at the moment." Releasing *It Was Good* turned out to be almost as challenging as the events that inspired it. The album was scheduled to come out last April, but lockdown measures delayed its release. In order to keep it from being indefinitely shelved, the singer took matters into her own hands, taking a DIY approach to the album's visuals. The cover features the singer peering over the fence of her home while holding a hose; the video for "Can I" featured sex workers performing via webcam (and astutely ends with a written message from abolitionist activist Da'Shaun Harrison highlighting the increased difficulties for black sex workers). Still, the low-fi offerings weren't quite what Kehlani had in mind. "I had plans

to create this visual experience, and I didn't get to," she laments.

For her upcoming third album, she's hoping things go differently. In September, Kehlani holed up in a Malibu Airbnb with friends and collaborators for a writing camp. She thought they were just making a few new tracks for the deluxe edition of *It Was Good*.

"We just made so much cool shit, and it was so different from what I would consider to be able to be on the deluxe because it didn't sound anything like it," she explains. "I just was like, 'Fuck it, this is a whole new project.'"

Kehlani loved the camp so much that she named her upcoming third album after the street the Airbnb is on: *Bluewater Road*. After the bigger crew dispersed, she moved down the street, to a different spot, to write more. She then enlisted Andrew "Pop" Wansel to executive-produce the LP, having worked with him and his production partner, Warren "Oak" Felder (known together as Pop and Oak), on the majority of *SweetSexySavage*. With her new sobriety and perspective, she wanted to create something lighter than *It Was Good*, both for the sake of the world and herself.

"Everything going on right now is heavy," she begins. "Now, not

only am I not in a heavy time, but I'm starting to get out of the mindset of 'When are we getting back to normal?' And more like, 'This is our new normal.' That's a very privileged thing to say, being that I haven't experienced a close loved one pass away or get the virus. I think people need some type of warmth, and I'm in the head space of centering positivity."

While she waits, Kehlani is focusing on celebrating a more meaningful home: the large plot of land in Simi Valley she bought last summer. She has been planning how to best make use of the land for her and Adeya, looking into urban farming, even though the Santa Ana wind pocket has been busting out windows and blowing tiles from the roof. "My plan is to just have everybody come take part in it and come and grab things when they want," she tells me, her tarot card proving to be true. "It [will] be a space for everybody to start with those dreams that they have." **BRITTANY SPANOS**

Kehlani's Top Five Features

The singer has been a not-so-secret weapon for a wide range of artists

1. "Cigarettes & Cush"

Stormzy feat. Kehlani and Lily Allen

Kehlani's range is on full display on this collaboration with U.K. rapper Stormzy and singer Lily Allen. Kehlani's verse takes the song's depth to another level.

2. "Ring"

Cardi B feat. Kehlani

Kehlani offers a gut punch of a chorus on this quietly romantic cut from Cardi B's 2018 album, *Invasion of Privacy*. Kehlani's sincerity plays as the perfect foil to Cardi's braggadocious brand of sensitivity.

3. "Good Thing"

Zedd With Kehlani

Zedd's retro production shines bright next to the singer's celebration of independence and not letting love dictate worth, offering a nice reminder of Kehlani's chops as a bona fide pop star.

4. "Done for Me"

Charlie Puth feat. Kehlani

Kehlani and Puth play a couple caught in an emotional-labor tug-of-war on this slick, Wham!-inspired duet from Puth's *Voicenotes*. Her era-spanning versatility is on full display.

5. "Hit My Phone"

Megan Thee Stallion feat. Kehlani

On this *Suga* cut, the pair are drunk-texting from the club, looking for some late-night attention. Kehlani's right in her comfort zone, delivering searing emotional honesty.

RS RECOMMENDS

OUR TOP POP-
CULTURE PICKS OF
THE MONTH

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1



**Real-life advice
from a guy who's
seen, done, and
survived just about
everything**

I'm 43, and I've dated many women over the years. Some of these relationships have lasted for years, and I truly felt that I loved them, but I've never had the courage to take the next step and propose marriage. How do you know when a girl is the one?

—Kevin, Chicago

I once asked my mom, "What's the deal with love and marriage? You find someone who loves you, and then you're happy?" She said, "Actually, if you want to be really happy, find someone who you can make happy." That's a really brilliant piece of information, and it's what I did. I found someone I always want to put first. I have been in a relationship some 43-odd years. That doesn't happen by accident. It happens because you work at it and because you care about each other.

Settle this once and for all: Beatles or Stones? And please explain your answer in detail.

—Clyde, Scottsdale, AZ

Beatles. Mainly because of the range of music that they did. The Stones do have a fairly wide range of stuff, from raunchy songs like "Brown Sugar" to ballads like "Wild Horses," but they don't have a range like the Beatles, and the Beatles could sing harmony. The Stones can't do that for squat, and the Beatles did it really well. Now this is a matter of personal taste, of course. But for me, even though I like the Stones, it's the Beatles. No question.

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BOOK

1. 'The Project'

This new YA novel from *New York Times* bestseller Courtney Summers is a harrowing look at cults and the people who fall prey to them, as seen through the eyes of a young journalist trying to save her sister.

PODCAST

2. 'Science Vs'

Host Wendy Zukerman has set the record straight on everything from glowing platypuses to the revolution of safe abortions (and a whole lot of Covid-19 myths). Now she's back for a 10th season of this Gimlet podcast.

DOCUMENTARY

3. 'The People Vs. Agent Orange'

Investigative reporter Alan Adelson and filmmaker Kate Taverna trace the history of the deadly herbicide turned weapon by focusing on Vietnamese activist Tran To Nga and lifelong environmentalist Carol Van Strum in Oregon.

ALBUM

4. 'Lost Themes III: Alive After Death'

John Carpenter wrote the chilling music for his movies (*Halloween*, *Assault on Precinct 13*) because he couldn't afford composers. Now, he's making soundtracks with no movies. His latest album of icy synthesizer vignettes cuts as deep as Michael Myers.

PODCAST

5. 'Stolen'

In 2018, 23-year-old mother Jermain Charlo left the Badlander bar in Missoula, Montana, and vanished. Gimlet's new investigative series seeks to solve the mystery of her disappearance — just one of the thousands of indigenous girls and young women who are missing in the U.S.

MOVIE

6. 'Boogie'

Fresh Off the Boat creator Eddie Huang's directorial debut is the story of a teen Chinese American basketball prodigy, Alfred "Boogie" Chin (played by newcomer Taylor Takahashi), and the challenges he faces — including from his rival, played by the late rapper Pop Smoke.

VIDEO

7. "Fellowship," by Serpentwithfeet

The video for the L.A. musician's new single feels like a lush landscape painting brought to life, made real with the two stars' palpable love and liberation.

ALBUM

8. 'Bob Dylan—1970'

Bob Dylan's May 1st, 1970, studio jam with George Harrison, where they play impromptu renditions of everything from "It Ain't Me Babe" to "Yesterday," has

been treasured by bootleg collectors for decades, but it's finally available as an official set.

BOOK

9. 'The Motherlode: 100+ Women Who Made Hip-Hop'

Author Clover Hope's encyclopedic entries put rap's female innovators at center stage — from old-school greats like Lil Kim to less-remembered mic rockers like Bytches With Problems.

SOUND SYSTEM

10. Oda

These elegant speakers (back for a limited run) are more than just artisanal hi-fi — they're paired with a subscription to curated "seasons" of audio performances, streamed into your living room.



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Olivia Rodrigo Hits the Gas



THERE'S NEVER BEEN anything quite like “Drivers License.”

While Olivia Rodrigo’s breakup ballad takes its sweet time to get to its poignant musical peak, it took off in a sprint right away on the charts. The Lorde-esque track – released as Rodrigo’s official debut single after a slew of songs from *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series*, the Disney+ show on which she co-stars – not only debuted at Number One on the RS 100, it broke the record for the biggest debut in the chart’s history, which was previously set by Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion’s era-defining 2020 smash “WAP.” It also marked the biggest first-week streams for a single in all of Alpha Data’s history.

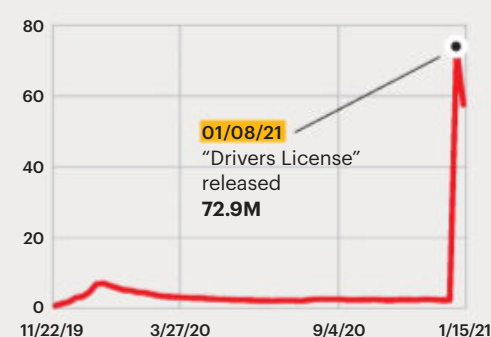
Next to other debut singles, there’s no comparison. Even Harry Styles’ first solo song, “Sign of the Times,” pulled in less than one-sixth of the first-week streams that “Drivers License” did. And Rodrigo’s song stayed strong at Number One through the month of January, holding off competition from Ariana Grande, Megan Thee Stallion, Doja Cat, and SZA.

In fact, the last time we saw a hit this big it was “Old Town Road.” That

song still holds the record for the biggest single-week stream count in Alpha Data history (“Drivers License” comes in second) – but even Lil Nas X’s hit didn’t come out running quite like Rodrigo’s, taking a few months to hit its peak of 80 million weekly streams.

Now, Rodrigo takes Number One on the Breakthrough 25 chart for Janu-

Streams for Olivia Rodrigo
(In Millions)



ary. All told, she saw 166 million on-demand audio streams for the month – an increase of 2,400 percent, compared to December. That’s the biggest growth we’ve seen since DaBaby, who had a full album out when he topped the chart with an increase of 232 million streams. Time will tell if Rodrigo can keep this pace going. **EMILY BLAKE**

Biggest Songs by First-Week Streams

			STREAMS
1		Olivia Rodrigo Drivers License	67.7M
2		Drake feat. Lil Durk Laugh Now Cry Later	52.4M
3		Cardi B feat. Megan Thee Stallion WAP	52.0M
4		Future feat. Drake Life Is Good	46.8M
5		Drake In My Feelings	40.4M



			STREAMS
6		Drake Can't Take a Joke	33.5M
7		Travis Scott and Kid Cudi The Scotts	32.6M
8		Travis Scott Stargazing	31.8M
9		DJ Khaled feat. Justin Bieber, Quavo, Chance the Rapper, and Lil Wayne I'm the One	31.4M
10		Kodak Black feat. Travis Scott and Offset Zeze	31.3M

Songs are ranked by total on-demand audio streams in the seven days after their release. This list ranks songs released on or after January 1st, 2015.

FROM TOP: ERICA RODRIGUEZ; JEFF BOTTARI/ZUFFA LLC/GETTY IMAGES

FROM TOP: ZACH WOLFE; ERICA HERNANDEZ; ZACH WOLFE; SPOTEMGOTTEM/YOUTUBE; 1501 CERTIFIED ENTERTAINMENT; APEX VISIONS; JOSH BIONDI; JIMMY FONTAINE; PHRAA/RIMAS ENTERTAINMENT; SARAH BERINATO; MATTHEW BARLOW + STEPHEN SCHOFIELD; SARAH PARDINI; MOLLY CRANNA; NICK FARRAR; RACHEL DEEB; COURTESY OF JESSIA



HIGHLIGHT

POOH SHIESTY'S STEADY RISE

WHILE SOME ARTISTS take off in a sprint, with a TikTok hit taking them from zero to a million streams over-night, Pooh Shiesty's rise has been much more gradual — a steady build from a simmer to a boil that has been taking place over the past six months. After the Gucci Mane signee was featured on the compilation *Gucci Mane Presents: So Icy Summer*, he reached the Artists 500 chart for his first time in September 2020, and through the fall, he steadily inched his way toward the Top 200.

So far, the Memphis rapper has shown no signs of slowing down, which tends to happen to artists who find viral TikTok success. In January, Shiesty

FAST FACT

Pooh Shiesty has seen more than 239 million on-demand audio streams to date.

reached the Top 100 of the Artists 500 for the first time, after seeing a 59 percent month-on-month growth in streams, compared with December. Most of his January success was thanks to the Lil Durk-featuring

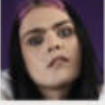
"Back in Blood," which became Shiesty's first RS 100 hit. By the end of January, "Back in Blood" was in the Top 25.

Shiesty managed to reach Number 73 on the Artists 500 all before he released a single mixtape. *Shiesty Season*, which he dropped in early February, was at the top of Apple Music's weekly pre-add chart at press time — a spot previously held by country star Morgan Wallen's *Dangerous: The Double Album*, which went on to break the RS 200 record for the biggest debut for a country album.

Shiesty sees his consistent pace as one of the main reasons for his success. "Hard work, consistency, and my loyal supporters," he says, citing the factors that have gotten him here. "They've been showing me a crazy amount of love from city to city. I also have people like Gucci in my corner — he's been guiding me like a big brother through this whole thing." **E.B.**

Breakthrough Artists

Olivia Rodrigo leads the pack of the fastest-rising up-and-coming artists in January

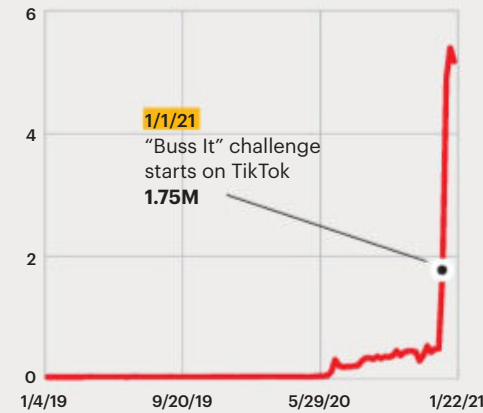
			STREAMS
1		Olivia Rodrigo	166M
2		Pooh Shiesty	23.5M
3		SpotemGottem	15.8M
4		Erica Banks	15.4M
5		Dusty Locane	8.2M
6		Kim Dracula	8.1M
7		Kevo Muney	7.6M
8		Eladio Carrión	7.6M
9		Niko Moon	7.3M
10		Joshua Bassett	6.2M
11		Yung Baby Tate	5.9M
12		Kris Bowers	5.8M
13		Morray	5.7M
14		Tenille Arts	5.1M
15		Jessia	4.4M

Artists are ranked by their growth in on-demand audio streams from January 1st through January 31st, compared with the month of December.

Erica Banks' Glow Up

"Buss It" soundtracked countless clips on TikTok — with Tracee Ellis Ross, Rico Nasty, and Iggy Azalea all taking up the challenge to go from no makeup to full glam — but the most impressive glow up belonged to Erica Banks, the Texas rapper behind the "Hot in Herre"-sampling track. Before January, Banks was seeing around 400,000 weekly on-demand audio streams, and by mid-January, she had reached 5 million. "Buss It" rose to Number 80 on the RS 100 in January, while Banks reached Number 479 on the Artists 500. Nelly's 2002 hit also saw a 16 percent boost in streams.

The Rise of 'Buss It'
(Streams in Millions)



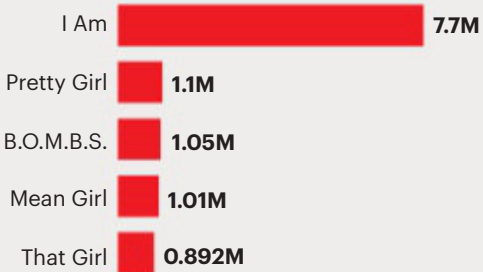
Dusty Locane Rolls In

Since the late Pop Smoke took Brooklyn drill mainstream, several other drill rappers have scored hits of their own, with Sheff G, Fivio Foreign, and Bizzy Banks landing on the Breakthrough 25 chart in 2020. The latest is Dusty Locane, whose rumble of a voice has drawn comparisons to Pop Smoke. Despite having released just three singles, he has gotten as many as 4 million on-demand audio streams per week. His standout track so far is "R6OLLXN N CONTROLLXN (FREESTYLE)," with 8.9 million on-demand audio streams to date. Overall, the rapper saw an increase in streams of 1,000 percent in January.

Yung Baby Tate Gets Rich

If you're the type to roll your eyes at the idea of willing things into existence, take a look at Yung Baby Tate. The Atlanta rapper wrote the Flo Milli-featuring "I Am" about the power of positive thinking — with lyrics like "I am healthy, I am wealthy, I am rich, I am that bitch" — and it went on to become a breakout hit, with nearly 8 million on-demand audio streams to date. After "I Am" went viral on TikTok in January, it helped her to a 350 percent month-on-month growth in streams, while "I Am" reached the Top 10 on the Trending 25 chart.

Biggest Tracks
(Streams in Millions)



ARTIST YOU NEED TO KNOW

Dreaming R&B's Future in Denmark

Erika de Casier recently spent a few weeks holed up in a century-old house on a small island off the coast of Denmark, called Fanø. She was there with other artists who'd chosen to isolate together — something like a TikTok Hype House, but less annoying. She describes the surroundings as quiet, and even spookier than usual in the ongoing pandemic: "You can really hear your thoughts."

De Casier is no stranger to introspection. Her singing voice is gentle, nearly a whisper, and her love songs have an existential bent. Take her recent single "No Butterflies, No Nothing," in which de Casier sings

about fading love over a deconstructed club beat: "Yeah, I've been looking real closely/Didn't really find nothing."

De Casier was born in Portugal, with a mother from Belgium and a father from Cape Verde; as a kid, she relocated to Denmark, where she and her brother were the only mixed-race children in their new school. She remembers finding solace in music videos: "MTV was a place where I could feel a sense of belonging."

Her 2019 debut, *Essentials*, featured sensual R&B laced with hints of U.K. garage and drum-and-bass. For her follow-up, out later this year on 4AD, she wrote songs that recall the empowerment ballads of Destiny's Child or TLC, with a more inward focus. "I've had a lot of time to think about how I am with people," she says, "and parts of my emotions that I haven't maybe dealt with before." JEFF IHAZA

10-SECOND BIO

BASED IN
Copenhagen

STUDENT LIFE
De Casier submitted tracks from her album as part of a university project: "They thought it was cool."



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MOVIES

Day channels the spirit of Holiday.

Lady Sings the Blues Again

How ‘The United States vs. Billie Holiday’ retells the singer’s story for the BLM era – and brings Billie back to life

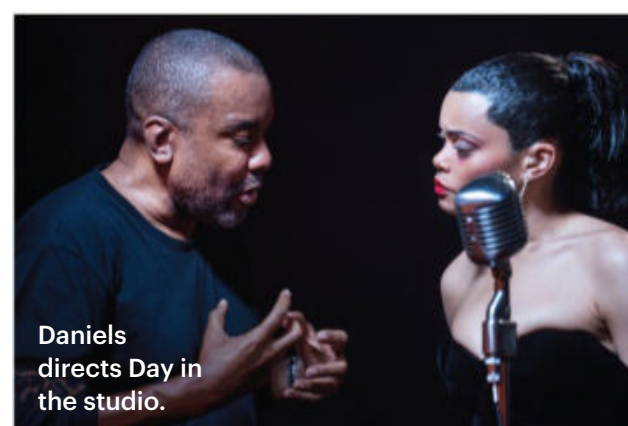
By DAVID BROWNE

DIRECTOR Lee Daniels was in the midst of wrapping up his latest movie – *The United States vs. Billie Holiday*, which tells the story of the late, troubled jazz singer and how “Strange Fruit,” the anti-lynching protest song she introduced to the world, brought her both triumph and troubles – when he noticed an unsettling parallel. He suddenly got a firsthand look at just how timely his new film project was. “We were in the middle of editing and that [George Floyd’s death] happened,” he recalls. “People were sending me [protest] videos of people sing-

ing ‘Strange Fruit’ in the middle of the street. It was crazy.”

Since her death in 1959 of complications from years of drug and alcohol abuse, Holiday has remained a lingering presence in pop culture. She was first portrayed onscreen by Diana Ross in 1972’s *Lady Sings the Blues*, and her unhurried, hypnotically forlorn phrasing can be heard in the work of Erykah Badu, Valerie June, and many other unconventional soul singers. “She’s more than just a musical icon,” says singer Andra Day. “And people are just starting to discover that. They really made her into just a tragic drug addict who sang jazz. And she was more than that.”

That re-evaluation will likely intensify with *The United States vs. Billie Holiday*, the first Holiday biopic since *Lady Sings the Blues*. With Day making her acting debut in the lead, the movie doesn’t shy away from the turbulent aspects of Holiday’s life – one filled with substance abuse, drug arrests, jail time,



Daniels directs Day in the studio.

and a series of abusive relationships with men. “Sometimes you say, ‘Oh, girlfriend, please get some therapy!’” laughs Pulitzer-winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, who wrote the script. “The wrong kind of guy. Drugs. But people are complicated, and one side fuels the other. Maybe her recklessness in choosing men fed into her thinking, ‘I’ll say what I want to say.’”

The film also touches, obliquely, on Holiday’s sexual relationship with actress Tallulah Bankhead, adding

another dimension to Holiday’s impact. “She symbolizes freedom,” says Day. “She symbolizes equality. She represents not just civil rights, not just the black community, but the LGBTQ community. She represents almost every marginalized group of people. She was the original ‘Fuck the police.’”

But the film largely focuses on the harassment Holiday endured at the hands of the FBI, which saw “Strange Fruit” as incendiary. To take the singer down, the agency decided to zero in on her heroin addiction, and assigned a black agent named Jimmy Fletcher (played by Trevante Rhodes, known for his work in *Moonlight* and *Bird Box*) to track and arrest Holiday. According to the movie, the two eventually became lovers.

“They were trying to eradicate her legacy,” says Day. “She was one of the

first people to say it out loud and really understand that these drugs were dropped in our community during the first war on drugs, in the Thirties and Forties. But she was way too famous, so they were trying to get rid of her.”

Even as she was dogged by personal issues and career setbacks, however, Holiday kept singing “Strange Fruit” until her death – in a hospital room with police still looking in on her and taking her mug shot before she passed. “She’s often painted as a poor black woman who did drugs, but that’s the picture the powers that be want us to believe,” says Parks, who was approached by film producers to pen the script. “She was a really strong woman who would not be denied. Our Billie is not a victim. Standing up to injustice and power comes on really strong in our film.” Adds Daniels, “She was the Rihanna-meets-Cardi B of that generation. She didn’t give a fuck. And she did what she wanted to do right up to the end.”

DANIELS, who has explored black lives on TV (*Empire*) and in film (*Precious*, *The Butler*), has vivid memories of seeing *Lady Sings the Blues* when he was a teenager in Philadelphia in the 1970s. “I had never seen a black couple in love before onscreen, and I had never seen beautiful black people like Diana Ross and Billy Dee Williams,” he says. “They were like relatives being celebrated on the big screen and speaking in a dialect that I completely understood, in an environment that I completely understood, with drugs and fashion.”

Decades later, the director was immediately intrigued when he was sent Parks’ script, which was partly inspired by *Chasing the Scream*, Johann Hari’s 2015 book about the war on drugs (which touches on Holiday’s story and the feds’ role in her life). “It just took me by storm,” Daniels says, “once I understood the story and that the government took her down because of that song. I thought it was an important story to tell.”

Worried about offending Motown head Berry Gordy, who co-produced *Lady Sings the Blues*, Daniels reached out for permission. (Gordy, says Daniels, told him it was fine “as long as you do it right.”) But other obstacles remained, especially involving funding for his project. “You have some faith in the studios, especially after *Empire*,” he says. “I thought, ‘There’s no way I’m not going to get this movie financed.’ But not a studio felt it was deserving of the money that was needed. It’s just another form of racism and bigotry in Hollywood. You can’t talk about

it, because you want to work, but at this point I don’t care anymore.”

Daniels eventually secured independent funding by way of New Slate Ventures, a hedge-fund-backed company with an eye on racially diverse projects; the company’s first film was Radha Blank’s autobiographical *The Forty-Year-Old Version*. Going with outside financing rather than via a Hollywood studio allowed Daniels to ignore advice to cast a boldface name as Holiday. Daniels wanted someone who could sing Holiday’s songs, but when he was first approached about Day – who hadn’t acted since her days in high school theater in California – Daniels admits he was wary. “I didn’t really want to meet with her because so many people told me to meet with her,” he admits, “and I don’t like being told, ‘This is the girl for you.’”

For her part, Day had concerns about her own ability when the two finally met. “I was like, ‘Why are we having this meeting right now?’” she says. “I swear, it was like him and I sitting in a meeting, both of us believing that I could not do this. I was like, ‘Are we sure this is a good idea?’” (Day also recalls, with a laugh, the time her high school teacher told her she should listen to Holiday, whom Day had never heard of: “I said, ‘I don’t know who that dude is.’”)

But during that get-together, Daniels and Day wound up bonding over what the actor calls “insecurities and self-sabotaging.” Both also related to Holiday in different ways. The filmmaker, who grappled with a drug problem for several decades, related to Holiday’s addiction struggles and initially saw the movie as focusing largely on that issue. Her wrenching rendition of “Autumn in New York” also reminds him of a partner who died of AIDS. And Day connected with the abuse Holiday took as part of relationships with husbands and lovers. Although Holiday was often physically violated, Day says she herself was not, “to the degree that she was, but in other ways.”

To ensure he had made the right choice, Daniels sent Day to an acting coach, the same person who had helped Mary J. Blige prepare for her role in *Mudbound*, the 2017 racial-tensions film set in the South. Daniels then saw one of Day’s rehearsal tapes. “It was jaw-dropping,” he says. “She had tapped into something, and I knew it was God speaking, and I couldn’t deny that anymore.”

To prepare for the role, Day lost 39 pounds and began drinking and smoking, despite normally not doing either, and she had to learn to evoke the sultry murmur of Holiday’s voice – a challenge in itself, given how little footage

Renaissance of a Cultural Legend

How ‘Watchmen’ and Springsteen helped bring Holiday back

The United States vs. Billie Holiday may bring the late singer back into the 21st-century public eye, but it’s part of a larger revival over the past few years. In light of Black Lives Matter and Congress’ recent failed attempt to pass the Emmett Till Anti-Lynching Act (which would make lynching a federal crime), “Strange Fruit” has made a comeback: The song has recently been sampled by rapper Rapsody, covered by R&B veteran Bettye LaVette, and praised anew by Bruce Springsteen. “Un-



fortunately, ‘Strange Fruit’ is still relevant, and people are beginning to understand that it was our very first protest song,” says Andra Day, who covered it herself in 2017. “She was a true civil rights hero.”

Meanwhile, Holiday’s vintage recording “You’re My Thrill” was featured in an episode of HBO’s *Watchmen*, and she was the subject of a recent documentary (*Billie*) and an indie-rock tribute album (M. Ward’s *Think of Spring*). Holiday’s 1958 *Lady in Satin* ranked Number 317 last year on ROLLING STONE’S 500 Greatest Albums list. “Her story is similar to Robert Johnson’s,” says Ward. “The talent and emotion are the hooks that draw you in, and once you get into the mystery of their lives, you’re in it for the long haul.” **D.B.**

exists of her either singing or talking. “There are a few audio clips of her live performances, just like interviewing or shit-talking with her band,” Day says. “But you get a real vibe and a real sense of her, which is a very experienced woman, but also childlike in a way.” Still, Day says she was plagued with doubt during the filming of the movie. “‘Intimidating’ is not the appropriate word – ‘fear of God’ is appropriate,” she says. “It was the scariest shit I’ve ever done in my life. Every day I just woke up being like, ‘Today’s the day I’m going to suck and they’re going to fire me.’”

In 2012, the family of Holiday’s last husband, which was running her estate, sold the estate rights to Concord Music for an undisclosed sum. The renewed interest in Holiday is also prompting Concord to further explore opportunities to raise Holiday’s profile. The estate – which was never contacted about Daniels’ film, although it did lend its support to director James Erskine’s documentary *Billie*, released last December – is exploring a possible stage musical based on her life. “She touches on everything America is talking about now: systemic racism, abuse, LGBTQ rights, police brutality,” says Concord executive Michele Smith. “She is the American story. Holiday wasn’t perfect, but she did the best she could.” Still, Smith says the company is being watchful of licensing: a request to use Holiday’s name and likeness on whiskey tumbler glasses, for instance, was denied in light of the late singer’s alcoholism. “She died from an addiction,” says Smith, “so we’re careful about what’s right for her and her legacy.”

Daniels says he’s disappointed that *The United States vs. Billie Holiday* will premiere on Hulu and not in theaters as first intended (by way of Paramount), another victim of Covid-19’s impact on the film business. “They kept saying, ‘We’re going to go full ahead,’” he says, “and I’m thinking to myself, ‘How is this going to happen? How are they going to release it in February?’ I was nervous as hell.” Daniels accepts the straight-to-streaming decision, but adds, “I’m sad, because this was shot on film, and to watch it on the big screen is how it was meant to be looked at. So I’m sort of bummed about that.”

Daniels says he’s at peace with the project in other ways. On the last day of shooting, he had a dream about Holiday in which she was emerging from a car and approached him. “I said, ‘I’m doing a movie about you – I hope you like it,’” he says. “And she said, ‘Are you gonna do me right?’ And I said, ‘I think so.’ In my heart, I know I did.” **🎬**

China's Rising Youth Culture Hub Bilibili Partnered with Rolling Stone China to Celebrate the 100 Most Notable Content Creators in 2020

BY CAIWEI CHEN

SPONSORED BY



Although it has been half a century since the era of classic rock & roll, the vigor and transformative power of popular music and youth culture never faded away. With the importance of this cultural impact in mind, *Rolling Stone* officially launched *Rolling Stone China* in early 2021, with the aim of amplifying the voices from China's booming popular-culture scene. In its March issue, the magazine landed an exclusive partnership with Bilibili — the Chinese video platform featuring massive amounts of original, youth-oriented, user-generated content — and will reveal the winners of “Bilibili Power Up” which awards 2020's top content creators.

Much like YouTube, Bilibili's closest Western equivalent, the platform enables users to upload video content, create their own channel, and build a community through various functions, including real-time comments and livestreaming. Despite their similarities, Bilibili has established itself as a more youth-oriented content service in the 11 years since it was founded. Starting off as a platform for anime-comics-game lovers, Bilibili in the past few years became home to thousands of different fandoms and youth-subculture communities by empowering content creators, also known as “Uploaders.” Now, the platform boasts 200 million monthly active users and 1.7 million monthly active content creators, and is consistently chosen as Chinese Gen

Z's favorite app, according to a survey conducted by QuestMobile.

Compared with their older counterparts, Chinese millennials and Gen Z have grown up with the burgeoning Chinese economy since the 1980s and are more individualized and expressive than ever. The demographic's early access to the global internet and digital devices fundamentally shaped their worldview, as well as the way they interact with the world. They are unprecedentedly open-minded, educated, creative, and dedicated to what they love. The viewing, commenting, and creating processes that take place in the Bilibili community have been key in that experience.

Ever since visual media appeared in the form of moving pictures and television, video has become the dominant way that media is consumed by the general public. This past decade, creating video content has become more accessible than ever. By capitalizing on increasingly available methods of shooting and editing, the Chinese youth are reimagining interest-based communities and updating an established paradigm to embrace new digital entertainment experiences.

When considering the rapidly changing Chinese contemporary society, many wonder what the future holds for popular technologies that specifically help individuals develop new interests, acquire new knowledge, and help build the next frontier of youth culture. Bilibili will support these endeavors, as an online community where young people express their

individuality and unleash their creativity. As a digital culture pioneer for Chinese Gen Z, Bilibili celebrates all niche subjects equally, while harboring an increasing amount of content of mainstream subjects through youth perspectives.

While Chinese youths do not come off as rebellious as their Western counterparts, many have differentiated themselves from previous generations. On Bilibili, the serious and formal manner that prevailed on Chinese TV for decades is no longer. Instead, a down-to-earth, humanized, and relaxed approach to creative content is celebrated, whether the creator is reviewing a product, giving an opinion, making a mash-up of different TV shows, or simply documenting a day of his or hers.

Driven by their love and dedication to their subjects of interest, more and more content creators on Bilibili have emerged as key influencers in their own fields and independently curate conversations within and beyond their subculture communities, further blurring the boundary between amateur and professional.

Luo Xiang, a criminal-law professor who broke the record for the fastest growth in followers last year, is an educational content creator on Bilibili. With his uniquely witty teaching style and charismatic personality, “Criminal Law with Luo Xiang” has become one of the most popular channels that rose to prominence in 2020.

To celebrate the creators on the platform, Bilibili partnered with *Rolling Stone China* to announce the 100 creators who best captured the essence of youth culture in the past year. The large panel covered a range of subjects and formats, from travel vlogs and workout guides to gadget reviews, gaming commentary, and meme mash-ups. Together, the array of creators form a dynamic spectrum mirroring China's diverse youth culture: from the traditional to the avant-garde, from local to international, from indie to mainstream, from classic to innovative, and from the individual to the communal.

Through danmu, also known as “bullet chats,” a signature function of Bilibili that allows real-time comments to slide through the screen, users are able to participate in the viewing experience by adding their own color to their favorite content, participate in a collective viewing ritual and express their opinions in a tightknit community. Through features like this, pluralism is able to flourish on Bilibili.

After taking a close look at the unique culture on Bilibili, *Rolling Stone China* has compiled a highly condensed set of traits that define China's youth community compared with the rest of the world. Much like baby boomers, the Chinese youth have experienced a booming economy, material abundance, popularized education and mass culture. At the same time, the digital experience and access to the internet have made them relatable to the Western millennials. Their experiences in the three eventful decades of China's history have made them an incredibly complex and multifaceted group, and Bilibili has provided them with a realm to express themselves freely on the internet through visual media.

As China's youth become more central to society, a new digital lifestyle has formed on Bilibili. An ecosystem surrounding content, entertainment, e-commerce, and culture has emerged from the soaring originality of this generation. In their full glory, videos on Bilibili are now shaping China's mainstream popular culture as an embodiment of Chinese youth's claim for the future.

To view the full list of Bilibili and “*Rolling Stone China's*” 100 Most Notable Content Creators of 2020, go to [bilibili.com/BPU2020](https://www.bilibili.com/BPU2020)



WHEN CYNTHIA Erivo was cast as Harriet Tubman in the 2019 biopic *Harriet*, the internet lit up with criticism. Erivo is English, the outcry went, how could she do justice to a uniquely American hero? Her answer was a muscular performance that earned her an Oscar nomination. Backlash surrounding her casting as another American icon, Aretha Franklin, in the National Geographic series *Genius: Aretha* (premiering March 21st), was barely a whisper. Perhaps people are learning not to underestimate Erivo. Or perhaps it's just that anyone who's heard her sing knows her voice is undeniable — even the Queen of Soul herself. During Erivo's Tony-winning turn as Celie in *The Color Purple* on Broadway, Franklin visited backstage, singing a line of Erivo's bring-the-house-down number "I'm Here" back to her. When they met again at the 2016 Kennedy Center Honors, "she remembered me," Erivo says. "She said, 'You're the girl that can sing, right?'"

Harriet Tubman is an icon, but with Aretha, you're dealing with the shadow of a modern legend: the ultimate diva. Is that more challenging for you as an actor?

Yeah, because she had a couple of sides to her. There was the side in front of interviewers — if she wasn't quite comfortable with them, it was very reserved, superquiet. And then there's the side that her family got to see, just fun and jokey. She had a really big sense of humor. Also, she had such complex relationships with people. So it's less difficult, more daunting.

Was there one detail that unlocked her for you?

Watching *Amazing Grace* was eye-opening for me, because it's so strange — when she's singing "Amazing Grace," she looks like she's going to take flight. It's coming through her. And then she opens her eyes, and something disappears. I felt a sadness. Something left her for a second, and it only comes back when she's in the music, singing.



Q&A

Cynthia Erivo

The Tony, Emmy, and Grammy winner on playing Aretha Franklin and recording an album during a pandemic

By MARIA FONTOURA

How did you reach a place where you could sing like her without doing a note-for-note imitation?

There was a lot of learning to do, habits that she has that I don't have. There's a song called "Never Grow Old" I really struggled with, because it's free time — and Aretha does that a lot — where she's not necessarily singing what would be notated on paper; she's sort of singing around the notes. There's no time signature.

But you learn that there are things that she loves to do. She loves making you wait for the next note. It's leaning into the note and getting as much as you can out of that before you go to the next one.

At the same time that you were learning how to sound like Aretha, you were recording your first album, due out later this year. Was that disorienting?

Slightly, but because I was doing a lot of music, I think it lent itself to me being ready

enough to do it. There's a song on it that's almost seven years old. There's a song that's two years old. And then I wrote songs on Zoom with people. I recorded a lot of it in Atlanta [where *Aretha* was filmed], in a bedroom in the house I was staying in. My producer in New York would FaceTime me with his computer open, I would have my microphone and computer, and we would do it like that.

Did the events of the past year — Covid, social-justice

protests, political upheaval — influence the music?

There were songs I had written a while ago that felt perfect for now, which was a total happy accident. And then there are songs that I wrote specifically because of now, like one called "Sweet Sarah." I realized that there are lots of pieces coming out about the world, but I kept thinking about that one person who is in the house alone, who finds energy from being out and seeing people, and who now can't do that. I wanted something to comfort that person, to let them know that just because you're by yourself, it doesn't mean no one is thinking of you.

What have you taken away from this time period personally?

We get to have the serious conversations now. People who haven't been able to say what is on their mind or in their heart, now they're digging in and feeling the things that they haven't wanted to feel before. I think a lot of us walk around hiding the things that we're too scared to confront. This last year has taught people that if we don't deal with it now, we never get the chance to deal with it.

Have you had white friends ask you questions around race?

I've had a couple of people ask, and my thing is, I'm willing to help if they are willing to genuinely listen. But more than anything, I just wanted to be there for my black friends who were dealing with it. Because I knew they could also be there for me. I'm not American, but when you're in the skin, it doesn't really matter where you are.

You've been living in the U.S. for a while now. Do you have plans to become an American citizen?

After last year, not being able to vote felt paralyzing. Waiting to see what happens, knowing you're a part of the community but not quite enough so that you can vote was really tough. So, I would [like to], so I can be an active member of society here. But that will take some time. I'm working toward it. I want to do it in the right way. 🗳️

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How the Anti-Vaxxers Got Red-Pilled

What happens when a global pandemic, a vaccine resistance movement, and the age of conspiracy collide? A black hole of misinformation that poses a grave threat to public health

By TIM DICKINSON

ON CHRISTMAS EVE, Steven Brandenburg, a Milwaukee-area pharmacist, attempted to destroy more than 500 doses of coronavirus vaccine, because, he admitted, he feared the Moderna drug would “alter the recipient’s DNA.” Described in law-enforcement documents as a “conspiracy theorist,” Brandenburg, 46, had reportedly warned his wife that “the world is crashing down around us” and that “the government is planning cyberattacks and plans to shut down the power grid,” according to divorce-court documents.

If you’re surprised that a scientifically educated medical professional, trusted with dispensing life-saving medicine, could suffer a rebellion against reason and give himself over to discredited conspiracy theories, you haven’t been paying attention. In the America of the 2020s, respectable men and women surrender to this kind of unreal thinking every day. (Brandenburg pleaded guilty to federal tampering charges in January; his lawyer would not discuss Brandenburg’s conspiratorial beliefs.) The phenomenon is known as “red-pilling” – a reference to a scene in *The Matrix* where Keanu Reeves’ character chooses

to take a red pill and discover the hidden truths of the world – and it affects those whose once-rational skepticism swallows them whole, pulling them into a networked community of like-minded conspiracy theorists. While the public record does not indicate Brandenburg traveled this far, many find a home in the big-tent conspiracy of QAnon, whose members increasingly see vaccination as part of a diabolical plot by the “deep state” to enslave humanity.

Why has the nation become gripped with conspiracy theories – including so many revolving around the shots that could end this devastating pandemic? “It’s precisely because we’ve had 450,000 deaths, and so much uncertainty and so much fear, that there’s fertile ground for this stuff to take hold,” says Ashish Jha, a physician and dean of Brown University’s School of Public Health. The pandemic is also occurring in the context of a 20-year decline of American trust in institutions, says Ethan Zuckerman, who formerly directed the Center for Civic Media at MIT. He describes the QAnon cult as a reservoir at the bottom of that slippery slope. “Q is what happens when you take that mistrust in a really damaging direction,” he says. “It’s usually people who lost trust

in one institution and then found a coherent worldview that says, ‘Don’t just mistrust this one institution – mistrust all the institutions. All of them are in it together.’” This full rejection of confidence in doctors and drug companies, in media and philanthropy, in politicians and government agencies, Zuckerman says, is “how the anti-vax movement underwent almost a merger with QAnon.”

For most Americans still grounded in reality, the arrival of safe, effective inoculations against Covid-19 has sparked hope. The nine-month dash to design, test, and begin to administer inoculations against the devastating pandemic was an unprecedented medical triumph. The rollout of these drugs has already delivered protection for millions of the elderly and medically vulnerable. For younger, healthier people awaiting their shots, vaccination promises a ticket out of social isolation and back to a life of packed concerts, subway trains, restaurants, and nightclubs.

At present, America’s great challenge is ramping up supply to meet overwhelming demand. But experts caution the country will, sooner than later, confront a formidable wall of vaccine resistance that could block our return to “life as normal.” A Pew poll



in December found that only 60 percent of Americans intend to vaccinate and nearly 20 percent – or roughly 50 million adults – are dead set against it. If that many Americans abstain from vaccination, the coronavirus will continue to circulate, and to mutate, posing a grave ongoing threat to public health.

Vaccine hesitance can be rooted in reasonable concerns, says Jha. Were the new vaccines rushed to market too quickly? Did the Trump administration's overt politicization corrupt the approval process? Are side effects severe? Will our notoriously racist health system prioritize and safeguard communities of color that have been hardest hit by the pandemic? "We win no battles by minimizing" these worries, Jha says, "or suggesting that those people are being unreasonable or anti-science or anti-vaxxers. They're raising legitimate concerns that should be addressed."

But for millions of others, dread about vaccines defies logic or reason, and bleeds instead into belief systems of what Zuckerman has dubbed "the unreal" – that we're pawns in a diabolical global game run by ruthless elites and that vaccines are somehow not medicine but poison. "Concerns about safety have been absorbed into this other way of viewing the world," says Jack Bratich, a Rutgers professor and author of *Conspiracy Panics*. "It's about a plan to inject people with controlling substances. That's where QAnon overlaps with the anti-vax movement."

As demonstrated by the January 6th storming of the Capitol, perpetrated by many Americans immersed in the QAnon cult, this red-pilling can have deadly, destabilizing consequences, and not just for conspiracy-theory believers. "This may be the most important public-health issue of our time – misinformation, disinformation," Jha insists. And unlike the coronavirus, the contagion of conspiracy theory is one against which we're largely defenseless. "We have been blindsided," he says. "We as public-health people have to figure out how to counter it in a way that's effective. And we don't have the tools."

EXPLORING conspiracy theories and mass delusion can inadvertently popularize misinformation. So inoculate yourself with facts: The novel vaccines produced by Pfizer and Moderna are revolutionary and take advantage of our own cellular machinery to safeguard recipients against future coronavirus infection.

If you've seen computer renderings of the coronavirus, you know its surface is covered by spike proteins that create the "crown" that gives coronaviruses their name. Humans get infected with Covid-19 when these spike proteins pierce healthy cells, allowing the virus to invade, infect, and begin replicating.

Traditional vaccines have relied on exposing people to an inactivated (killed) or attenuated (weakened) virus. As the immune system reacts to a non-threatening inoculation, it gains the ability to fight off infection from the real pathogen. The Pfizer and Moderna vaccines don't include any virus at all. Instead, they use genetic code – messenger RNA or mRNA – to activate a few of our own cells to become spike-protein factories. The vaccine consists of tiny strands of mRNA encased in fat – a lipid particle – that allows them to slip inside a cell without being attacked. Once inside, the mRNA functions roughly like computer code, instructing cells to begin assembling coronavirus spike proteins out of amino-acid building blocks already in our bodies.



DEADLY CONSPIRACY THEORY

An anti-vaxxer at a MAGA rally in Washington, D.C. A Pew poll in December found roughly 50 million Americans are planning to abstain from vaccination, threatening herd immunity.

The presence of these strange proteins triggers our immune systems to create antibodies to neutralize them. Our immune system also summons T-cells to attack and shut down cells that were coded to produce spike proteins. Together, these immune responses prepare the body to fight off a real potential coronavirus infection. "It's very elegant," says Jha of the vaccine design. "It's also de-risked it a lot. There's no physical way to get Covid from this thing." As for the conspiracy theory that an mRNA vaccine alters your own genes? "It literally doesn't," he says. "It doesn't become part of your DNA."

Taming the pandemic will require both individual immunity – as produced by the vaccines – and community-level "herd immunity" created when a critical mass of individuals are resistant to infection. Herd immunity is like a firewall in public health; a localized flare-up of infection among a few individuals will be unable to spread broadly, instead burning itself out.

So far, the drugs appear to be living up to their billed efficacy of 95 percent protection from infection. And apart from some rare (and treatable) allergic reactions, the side effects seem well tolerated. But vaccine avoidance is already emerging as a troubling trend, particularly among health care and nursing-home workers on the front lines of the pandemic. Through mid-January, the CDC reported that only 32 percent of eligible nursing-home workers nationwide had chosen to get vaccinated.

Distrust of the vaccine is also high among communities of color. The reasons for this, while complex, are not difficult to understand. American public-health history is marred by institutional racism, including the horrific 40-year "Tuskegee Experiment," in which hundreds of black men with syphilis were promised treatment that was, in fact, deceptive-

ly withheld, leading to 128 deaths. Our current health care system produces wildly disparate outcomes for people of color, including a maternal death rate that's 2.5 times higher for black women than for white women. In the pandemic, communities of color have been hardest hit. These Americans disproportionately work in frontline positions, live in more crowded housing, have poorer access to doctors, and higher incidence of comorbidities. Meanwhile, crucial technologies like pulse oximeters, which use light to measure blood oxygenation and guide treatment, have been found to routinely malfunction on dark skin.

The hard truth is that returning to the point where Americans can go back to work or enjoy a night out at a crowded bar and be confident no one is going to get sick will require persuading millions to overcome their fear of vaccination and take a jab for the team. The 60 percent of Americans currently intending to get vaccinated is simply not good enough to establish herd immunity. "We've got to address the issues that help us get closer to 80 percent vaccination," Jha says. "I'd love to get up to like 90, 95 percent."

The larger the group of unvaccinated individuals, the more chance the virus can mutate to pose a danger, even to the already vaccinated. "Large outbreaks anywhere can give rise to variants that can escape vaccines everywhere," Jha writes. "It's the nightmare scenario of a never-ending pandemic."

LONG BEFORE the coronavirus hit, America had been gripped by a fierce anti-vaccine movement, which had itself become increasingly unmoored from scientific critique and drifted into conspiratorial waters.

Vaccines have always inspired popular fear. Decades ago, it was justified: The rollout of the polio in-

oculation in the 1950s tragically infected 40,000 children, paralyzing hundreds, and killing 10, because of botched manufacturing that failed to disable the live virus. Even with modern safety advances, vaccination campaigns expose a particularly American tension between personal choice and public safety. “In the U.S., there’s this suspicion or refusal around bodily sovereignty,” Bratich says. “People don’t like stuff stuck in them.”

Contemporary anti-vax culture took root in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when a startling rise in autism was hypothesized to be connected to childhood vaccinations. Robust science has since debunked any relationship between vaccination and autism. But at the time, the specter of vaccine injury sparked real concern among reasonable people.

In 1998, the prestigious British medical journal *The Lancet* published an article purporting to link the measles/mumps/rubella (MMR) vaccine to “developmental regression in a group of previously normal children.” In the U.S. a year later, a federal review of mercury in drugs highlighted that a mercury-based preservative in childhood vaccines could expose infants, over the first six months of life, to a potentially harmful quantity of the neurotoxic metal. Out of an abundance of caution, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommended that the preservative, thimerosal, be phased out of vaccines. In 2005, ROLLING STONE and Salon co-published a Robert F. Kennedy Jr. piece, “Deadly Immunity,” that helped push the provocative hypothesis that thimerosal triggered autism into wider circulation. The piece drew swift criticism and required significant corrections, including to a key statistic about childhood mercury exposure.

By the turn of the decade, both hypotheses had collapsed under the weight of scientific evidence. In 2009, a paper in *Clinical Infectious Diseases* cited “20 epidemiologic studies” to conclude that “neither thimerosal nor MMR vaccine causes autism.” *The Lancet* retracted its MMR paper in 2010, with the journal’s editor saying he felt he’d been deceived, while calling the paper “utterly false.” In 2011, Salon retracted the Kennedy piece, writing, “The best reader service is to delete the piece entirely.” The story no longer appears on ROLLING STONE’s website.

Fear of vaccination, however, didn’t disappear because scientists said it should. Instead, anti-vax beliefs spread widely, popularized by celebrities like actress Jenny McCarthy and then-*Apprentice* star Donald Trump, who infamously tweeted in 2014: “Healthy young child goes to doctor, gets pumped with massive shot of many vaccines, doesn’t feel good and changes – AUTISM. Many such cases!” In a 2016 survey, 77 percent of parents who chose not to vaccinate their children cited a feared link to autism, and 71 percent cited fear of vaccine additives.

That same year, faced with a public-health threat from schools where up to 40 percent of kids were unvaccinated, California eliminated a “personal exemption” to vaccination, effectively requiring shots for all kids to attend public school. Measles had been eliminated in the U.S. in 2000, but declining vaccination rates contributed to outbreaks infecting more than 1,200 across dozens of states in 2019. That year, the World Health Organization listed vaccine hesitance as one of its top “10 threats to public health.”

Today’s anti-vax movement has grown increasingly cozy with theories about dark agendas, ruthless profit motives, and powerful enemies, reserving peculiar

animus for billionaire Bill Gates, whose foundation promotes vaccination globally. For his part, Kennedy continues to promote unfounded links between vaccines and autism, even though thimerosal has been phased out of childhood vaccines: “They replaced it with aluminum,” he says, “which is almost as bad.” (Aluminum salts have been safely used in vaccines for more than seven decades, according to the CDC.) “People like me get vilified and ridiculed,” he says, “but I will debate anybody about this.”

Kennedy now runs the nonprofit Children’s Health Defense, where last April he published an article titled “Gates’ Globalist Vaccine Agenda: A Win-Win for Pharma and Mandatory Vaccination.” The piece purports to be grounded in science, but Kennedy gets the facts twisted. He claims, for example, that a 2010 Gates Foundation-funded trial of a malaria vaccine was responsible for “killing 151 African infants and causing serious adverse effects, including paralysis, seizure, and febrile convulsions, to 1,048 of the 5,949 children.” In reality, the trial was not implicated in

A 2020 poll found that 28 percent of Americans believed Bill Gates wants “to use a mass vaccination campaign against Covid-19 to implant microchips in people.” The belief rose to 50 percent of regular viewers of Fox News.

the death of any child, and only 13 malaria-vaccine recipients had significant side effects. The trial was conducted in a region of Africa with high child morbidity and mortality, and the terrifying numbers Kennedy touts come from tallying up every health crisis experienced by the kids in the trial – both malaria-vaccine recipients and those in control groups – and brazenly attributing every dark outcome to the jabs. This includes deaths from head injury, HIV, malnutrition, and drowning. (Confronted with these facts, Kennedy admits error: “One can never definitively say that a particular death was or was not caused by a vaccine,” he says. But he adds without evidence that every death was “plausibly attributed to the vaccines,” while also baselessly alleging that the use of different vaccines, rather than placebos, in the control groups was “an act of fraud that appears designed... to mask death rates in the study cohort.”)

The rest of Kennedy’s piece paints Gates as a reckless and unaccountable billionaire pulling the strings of global institutions. He points to a TED Talk that Gates delivered boasting that expanded vaccine use “could reduce population.” This is meant to sound nefarious, but Gates has long spoken of reducing

childhood mortality as a key to stabilizing populations in the developing world. As the conspiracy-debunking site Snopes explains: “Gates is not interested in using vaccines to reduce the population by using them as an agent of death or a tool to sterilize unsuspecting masses. Rather, Gates is interested in keeping more children alive in order to reduce the need for parents to have more children, thus limiting the overall population growth rate.”

If Kennedy dabbles in the Bill Gates conspiracy waters – writing that the coronavirus has given Gates “an opportunity to force his dictatorial vaccine programs” on all Americans – millions of others are performing cannonballs. A gee-whiz proposal, supported by the Gates Foundation, to use tiny subdermal markers for patients in the developing world to track their vaccination history, without needing a clinic to keep the paperwork, has morphed into a widely embraced conspiracy theory that Gates wants to microchip the citizens of the world. A YouGov poll last May found that 28 percent of Americans believed Gates wants “to use a mass vaccination campaign against Covid-19 to implant microchips in people that would be used to track people with a digital ID.” The belief rose to 44 percent of Republicans and to 50 percent of dedicated viewers of Fox News.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES have been part of the lifeblood of American politics for centuries. In the 1820s, so many Americans were convinced that a shadowy and perhaps satanic cabal threatened the republic that they formed the Anti-Masonic Party and elected dozens of members to Congress. In the Red Scare of the 1950s, the far-right John Birch Society accused President Dwight Eisenhower of being “a dedicated, conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy.”

Trump rose to political dominance promoting the birther conspiracy theory that Barack Obama had been ineligible to hold office. And he won and sustained the presidency by encouraging his white, working-class supporters to blame their social woes on the merciless “globalists” of the “deep state.” Conspiratorial thinking, academic research shows, often takes root in groups, like many in Trump’s base, that are experiencing economic or social dislocation. “People often turn to conspiracy theories when bad things are happening around them,” says Karen Douglas, a professor of social psychology at the University of Kent in England. “They are looking for ways to cope, people to blame,” she says. “If people believe that powerful, secret forces are responsible, then it isn’t their fault that things are bad for them,” and they can make themselves feel better without having to “tease apart the complex reasons for their disadvantage.”

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 created a “perfect storm” for new conspiracy theories to take root, says Bratich, the Rutgers professor. The pandemic overwhelmed government institutions, creating enormous fear and economic uncertainty. Lockdown life also created super-spreader conditions for paranoia, with Americans searching for answers in online forums where unreal ideas circulated unchecked. New converts were then able to spread these ideas, in real life, to their pods of close family and friends under lockdown.

Eric Oliver is a political-science professor at the University of Chicago who has studied [Cont. on 78]

REBIRTH

OF

KACEY MUSGRAVES

WOMEN

SHAPING

THE

FUTURE

The queen of 'galactic country' is following up a career-defining album (and a divorce) with a little help from Bach, Greek tragedy, and magic mushrooms

BY ALEX MORRIS

IT'S EXACTLY one week after the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, and her nerves having been frayed like a rodeo rope, Kacey Musgraves is today opting for some self-care. This is how she finds herself, raven tendrils piled carelessly atop her head, pale cheeks slightly flushed, in a floral and fetching Dolce & Gabbana swimsuit and up to her armpits in steaming hot water in a private session at Nashville's Holiday Salon & Bathhouse (SWEAT OUT YOUR SINS, its bumper sticker beckons, with a cheekiness that could easily find a home in a Musgraves lyric). "I just felt like starting the day off on some kind of therapeutic note," she explains, as if – that week of all weeks – an explanation were necessary.

In truth, her day started a few hours earlier, when she had been woken up by the light streaming through the large windows of the one-room guesthouse in which she's currently living while the many-roomed real house she moved into back in the fall is being transformed from the type of place that would be featured in design magazines to a different

type of place that would be featured in design magazines. Lots of plaster is involved, as well as lots of fleshy-pink paint. There will be heated blond floors, and linen pillows in various soothing and complementary hues. There will be an art room to house the clay sculpture of a camel she made in an art class this summer ("It was me and a bunch of old ladies, and it was so fun"). There will be a picture window.

But honestly, Musgraves has come to realize she has everything she needs in the "gnome house" out back by the pool. She has a minifridge filled with sparkling water and cheese. She has her Califone record player, upon which elegantly sits 1957's *Havana at 2 A.M.*, by a bygone Afro-Cuban group called Jose Madeira and His Orchestra. She has a book on love signs and another called *Cosmic Coupling*, as well as *The Prophet*, by Kahlil Gibran, which she only just started but can't recommend enough. She has her journal, in which she's been writing compulsively of late, and an impressively large flatscreen TV upon which she's been watching *Pen15* ("It's exactly like middle school") and Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*. What she does not have in abundance



PHOTOGRAPHS BY
RYAN MCGINLEY



WOMEN SHAPING THE FUTURE

is chairs, or really anywhere good to sit besides the bed, but that's mostly OK because it's mostly just Musgraves here, living out a pandemic and reverting to the homebody she would have been had she not, at age 24, released *Same Trailer Different Park*, the album that in 2013 set her Texas star into ascendancy.

It did so for any number of reasons, among them her biting wordplay, her uncanny ability to layer meaning, and her masterful embrace of the down-home sounds of pedal steel and banjo. It also ruffled plenty of feathers in the conservative country-music establishment by daring to advocate for a live-and-let-live LGBTQ+ inclusiveness and (horror of horrors) a casual acceptance of pot. "So, make lots of noise/Kiss lots of boys/Or kiss lots of girls/If that's something you're into," she sang in "Follow Your Arrow," along with "When the straight and narrow/Gets a little too straight/Roll up a joint – I would," thereby ensuring she would never become a darling of country radio, while also endlessly endearing herself to music critics and country-music detractors alike.

This was followed in 2015 by *Pageant Material*, in which Musgraves crooned that she was not, in fact, pageant material because "I'm always higher than my hair," railed against the "Good Ol' Boys Club" in a song of that title ("Cigars and handshakes, appreciate you but no thanks"), and otherwise turned her clever side-eye from the small-town social commentary of *Same Trailer* to the country-music establishment that had only tepidly embraced it. It was a neat trick, attacking country music from within, wielding its own tools against it with skill and precision. But none of this quite prepared her critics or her fans for 2018's *Golden Hour*. "What would it sound like if Imogen Heap made a country album?" she asked herself, before unleashing unto the world – without preamble or pretension or any mention of "crossing over" – a work in which her country twang and Americana roots mingle seamlessly with vocoders, disco rhythms, Eighties synths, and reverb.

Though Musgraves referred to it as "galactic country," the album had such pop bona fides that she was soon touring with Harry Styles, and winning Album of the Year not just at the Academy of Country Music Awards and the Country Music Association Awards, but also at the Grammys. "I don't hear a whole lot of stuff in contemporary country that has to do with the history of country music, [but] Kacey knows that music," none other than John Prine told this very magazine at the time. "I think what she's doing is really good."

Meanwhile, she could be found partying on Willie Nelson's bus with Gigi Hadid or hanging out in a barn with Reese Witherspoon. She racked up not only a fervent LGBTQ+ fan base, but in fact the same intersection of fans as Dolly, a group able to encompass both conservative country-music purists and the drag queens she some-

Senior writer Alex Morris wrote the Dua Lipa cover story for our February issue.





times brought up onstage. Her 2017 Christmas gift to her grandpa Darrell was a buy-in at Nelson's holiday poker game at his home in Maui, where grandpa apparently cleaned up pretty good ("Nana said he told all his friends that he beat Willie Nelson in poker"). She bought her childhood home and painted it pink.

Having accomplished all that, Musgraves is today forgoing her usual morning workout to indulge in the Himalayan salt dry sauna and the hot tub, where she flutters her feet and wishes that she could be the type of person to "be here every morning, just Zen out, do your meditation, say your intentions for the day." But, alas, she is not. Her Enneagram is 3 Wing 4, which is the Achiever ("child performer, high drive, knows what they want: that makes sense") and the Individualist ("the need to be different"). Four days ago, she did a guided mushroom trip, which might sound like an oxymoron but is something one can do if one wants to achieve a sense of compassion and calm the hard and fast way. "It was not recreational at all," she tells me. "It was like mental and spiritual labor. Like, 10 years of therapy in one sitting."

It was also overseen by a doctor and timed to a seven-hour-and-40-minute playlist developed by researchers at Johns Hopkins for this very purpose. The most intense part lasted four hours, during which time the whole point was to flood Musgraves' brain with so much psilocybin as to fritz out the well-worn synapse connections of habit and personality and create a kind of neural tabula rasa. "The idea is learning how to kill your ego," she explains. "The ego wants control. The ego can misinform you, as a person, your outlook and your inward feelings toward yourself.... The idea is you can embrace your shadow self and your shadow emotions, almost as if it's a character that needs love as well."

Indeed, Musgraves encountered just such a character, when at one point, deep in the trip, she came upon herself as a child. "I was probably nine or 10. And I saw myself as clear as possible. I told myself, 'I love you.' I told *her*, 'I love you.' And I felt this immense, overwhelming sense of empathy for her, and compassion. I hugged her. And it felt like that was the whole pinnacle reason that I was there doing that experience."

WHAT HAPPENED AT age nine or 10 was this: Musgraves started performing. And what was happening when she signed on for the guided trip was this: the emotional fallout from her divorce from musician Ruston Kelly, for the love of whom she had written *Golden Hour*. Whether those two things, the performing and the breakup, are related, who's to say? Certainly not Musgraves, who vaguely explains that her marriage "just simply didn't work out. It's nothing more than that. It's two people who love each other so much, but for so many reasons, it just didn't work. I mean, seasons change. Our season changed."

But there are other things she says that day that are perhaps more illuminating. For instance: "Part of me questions marriage as a whole, in general. I mean, I was open to it when it came into my life. I embraced it. I just have to tell myself I was brave to follow through on those feelings. But look at Goldie Hawn and Kurt Russell. They're doing something right." And: "I think I live best by myself. I think it's OK to realize that." And: "I've been doing a lot of reflecting on growing up as a woman in the South and being a performer from a young age — we were told to please, to make this person happy. That has to imprint on your code. It kind of erodes boundaries. So I'm trying to examine things that may not be useful anymore and maybe unlearn some things."

Musgraves was raised in the tiny East Texas town of Golden (population 200 on a good day), in the two-bedroom house she shared with her parents and her sister and, for a time, a flying squirrel named Icarus. Her parents owned a copy store called MPrints, and her mom made art on the side ("She'd make a fucking life-size horse out of sticks one day and a stained-glass guitar the next"). Once a month, the Musgraves girls would throw on jeans, white button-downs, red bandannas, and cowboy hats and hightail it to the stockyards in Fort Worth to perform with a kids' group called the Buckaroos, run by a herd of old-timey, old-school country & western aficionados. Musgraves learned to play mandolin and harmonica, and won national championships in yodeling under the tutelage of "the yodel queen of Texas, Janet McBride. The scene we're talking about here is very menial, but, yeah, man: I was a yodel gangster." She also made up half of the childhood duo Texas Two Bits and, at 12, got a guitar for Christmas, as well as lessons from the same dude who taught Miranda Lambert. She was a proficient plucker, but where she really excelled was songwriting, so much so that her parents paid a few hundred bucks for her to record an independent album when she was 13. Her grandmother worked as her booker, calling up stops on the Texas Opry circuit and proclaiming they just had to hear her grandbaby sing.

Musgraves was an achiever, but not, by nature, a pleaser, which makes for an interesting combo in the Venn diagram of personality. In school, she did well enough in classes that interested her, but shamelessly blew off those that didn't. She managed to get in trouble "just for dumb shit. I would talk back a lot or be late, just classroom disruption, always had to have the last word. I would cheat on papers. I would sneak out, get grounded. There was nothing to do in Golden, it wasn't even worth sneaking out for."

After high school, she moved to Austin, and then to Nashville's east side, living in a down-trodden house below an old woman everyone called Mama Sophia, with whom she would kind-

ly share her weed. She wrangled work as a demo-tape singer after quitting a job performing at kids' birthdays when, she says, the kid in question turned out to be Blake Shelton. "Actually, I found out later it was Blake Shelton," she qualifies. "But the guy was like, 'Yeah, there's a birthday party at the Palm restaurant and it's a famous person, and they need a French maid to deliver balloons and sit on the birthday boy's lap.' I was like, 'Yeah, no. I'm not doing that.'"

She also turned down the first record deal she was offered. By then, she'd gotten a staff position as a songwriter, and had realized that "there's a lot to being an artist that's pretty daunting. And you only get your first shot to say something to the world once, so it better be what you want to say." A year or so later, however, she'd figured out what that was, having rounded up a cache of songs she didn't want to give away to other artists. A few years after that, she was covering "No Scrubs" in London's Royal Albert Hall, and a few years after *that*, she was being heralded as "the

world's preeminent country-pop starlet who can fuck up a banjo lick real good and simultaneously know who Trixie Mattel is."

Her rise might have felt like a "Slow Burn," as per her song with that title, but looking back she realizes that it all happened in a blur of momentum. In the unexpected months of reflection the pandemic has provided, Musgraves has been

working to unblur things: the divorce, yes, but also the years of living on the road "like camping at full speed," the decades of eroded boundaries. "I'm someone who deals with anxiety by making sure I stay busy and moving," she says. "And I haven't had that luxury this year. So I've been forced to sit with my sadness, sit with my anxiety, sit with my anger, sit with all the things that you normally can outrun." She pauses to consider. "I think that's kind of a beautiful thing."

THAT EXPANSIVE PERSPECTIVE sure comes in handy in the parking lot. Towel-dried and wearing high-cut jeans and a fuzzy sort of jacket, she's behind the wheel of her Audi and apologizing for the tumbleweed of hair left behind by her dog, Pepper, when — "Shitballs!" — she backs right into the bumper of a nearby Honda SUV. She looks at me wide-eyed, mouth in a capital "O," the blissed-out glow of the spa eroding in nanoseconds. A scrape runs along the Honda's bumper, one that can't be buffed out by a spare Covid mask, try as Musgraves might. "Shit, what do I do?" she asks before sticking a note under the Honda's wiper with a fake name, her phone number, and the promise to "make it right." Only then does she check her own bumper, which is scraped in a similar fashion. This seems to concern her much less. "Jeez, I don't deserve nice things," she says wryly before gingerly pulling into [Cont. on 80]

"This last chapter of my life, and this whole last year and chapter for our country — at its most simple form, it's a tragedy," Musgraves says.

PRODUCTION BY RIVERSIDE ENTERTAINMENT; CHOREOGRAPHY BY LUISA OPALESKY; OPENING SPREAD: DRESS BY RYAN ROCHE; PREVIOUS SPREAD: TOP: SHORTS; AND SKIRT BY MIU MIU; OPPOSITE PAGE: EARRINGS BY EF COLLECTION.



WOMEN SHAPING THE FUTURE





Adrienne Banfield-Norris, Willow Smith, and Jada Pinkett Smith

The generations-spanning 'Red Table Talk' hosts have the realest roundtable on TV

○○○○ WHEN WILLOW SMITH was 11, she made a request of her mom, Jada Pinkett Smith: “I know you as my mother, but I want to know who you were *before* you were my mother.” Pinkett Smith called up her own mom, Adrienne Banfield-Norris, and they all settled in for a deep, multi-generational talk. “We saw how much it helps us,” says Smith, now 20. “It was like, ‘Whoa, this is really uncovering some things. I wonder if we can give this feeling to others.’” Seven years later, in 2018, *Red Table Talk* was born. The Facebook Watch talk show, hosted by all three women, is a place where they dig into everything from porn addiction to white privilege. It’s also become a tell-all destination for other celebrities, like influencer Olivia Jade, who discussed the college admissions scandal that put her parents behind bars. Pinkett Smith even brought herself to the table, opening up with husband Will Smith about her extramarital relationship while the spouses were separated. The goal now: “Broadening the empire,” Smith says. Gloria Estefan leads the first spinoff with her daughter and niece. One will launch in India next, then in the Middle East. The hosts hope it continues to open minds. “The variety of perspectives is interesting,” Pinkett Smith says. “People like to put black women in one big old pot. That myth has to be dissolved.” **BRITTANY SPANOS**

PHOTOGRAPH BY
YANA YATSUK



Nandi Bushell

The 10-year-old who Dave Grohl calls “best drummer in the world”

○ ○ ○ ○ NANDI BUSHELL is midway through a busy Saturday when she logs on to Zoom: She’s just spent the morning taking advantage of a rare snowfall in her home of Ipswich, England. “First, I just threw snowballs at my brother,” says the 10-year-old musician, who became an online sensation last fall thanks to a YouTube drum battle with one of her idols, Dave Grohl. “Then, all of the other kids in my street started playing. We got the sled out and sledded down the street, and then it got too cold.”

She could have been describing any kid’s winter-weekend fun, but Bushell’s childhood has been anything but standard. A few years ago – with help from her rock-loving father, John – she started posting her impressive drum covers of everything from System of a Down’s “Chop Suey” to Beyoncé and Jay-Z’s “Crazy in Love,” eventually earning co-signs from big names like Tom Morello, Questlove, and Lenny Kravitz. After her wildly charismatic 2019 take on Nirvana’s “In Bloom” started making the rounds online, she challenged Grohl to a virtual drum-off. He accepted, and last fall, the two started trading videos back and forth, with Grohl even writing an original song for Bushell that named her “number-one super girl” and “best drummer in the world.”

“A rock legend has been inspired by me. That is amazing,” says Nandi, who’s seated in her dad’s study flanked by framed photos of John Lennon, Aretha Franklin, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, and,

aply, Nirvana. “I’m inspired by [Grohl], so the fact that he’s inspired by me... speechless.”

Nandi first became interested in drums during Beatles-soundtracked breakfasts with her family. “We would make pancakes and listen to ‘Hey Jude,’ and see Ringo Starr playing on a drum kit,” she says. “I thought that was really awesome.”

When she was five, her parents bought her a child’s drum set as a reward for doing well in math club, and soon she was jamming with her father and sitting in at the local pub. Recently, Nandi has moved on to writing her own songs and using a loop station to cover rock staples like Led Zeppelin’s “Immigrant Song” on guitar, bass, and drums simultaneously.

She’s happy that her clips have been a bright spot during a difficult moment in the world. “I feel proud of myself and honored to know that people like watching my videos and feel happy watching them,” she says. “You know, they feel less sad because of all this Covid stuff.”

Post-pandemic, Bushell knows exactly how she’d like to translate her online success into the real world. For one thing, she’d love to meet Billie Eilish: “I like her style. It’s a style that hasn’t been invented – it’s her own, like, anti-pop.” Then, she adds, “Maybe I’ll fly over to America and perform at the biggest stadium. I want to write more songs, eventually create an album, tour around the world, and make that album platinum. And hopefully get a Grammy by 14 or 15.” **HANK SHTEAMER**

MICHELLE ZAUNER

One of indie rock’s finest songwriters pens a moving memoir about loss and food

WHEN MICHELLE ZAUNER lost her mother in 2014, the only thing that got her through was food. The Korean American musician, who has won acclaim for the dreamy indie rock she records as Japanese Breakfast, found that learning to cook comforting dishes like *jatjuk* (pine-nut porridge) and *kimchi-jjigae* (a savory, spicy stew) helped her grieve. “There was no sense of urgency to learning that [before],” says Zauner, 31. “I never thought I was going to have so little time with my mom.”

Zauner’s new memoir, *Crying in H Mart*, tells the story of their relationship through a lifetime of shared meals. She describes growing up as a mixed-race kid in Oregon and finding a new connection to her identity as she slurped *jajangmyeon* (black-bean noodles) with relatives in Seoul. When her mother received a sudden cancer diagnosis, Zauner moved back home. The book is a devastating portrait of loss, as she struggles with sorrow just as her music career was taking off.

“Being a caretaker for someone who’s dying was really, really hard at 25,” she says. “I felt this need to tell people what that was like – and also to explain to myself. I didn’t really enjoy going to therapy, so I started writing more about it.”

Zauner had studied creative writing in college, but she’d never been interested in writing about herself. “I wanted to write like Richard Ford and Raymond Carver, because that was what I loved to read,” she says. “I didn’t want to write an Asian story. I just wanted to write stories.” That all changed when her mother passed away: “It suddenly became the only story I did want to tell.”

In looking back, Zauner found that food had always been there, even at times when their relationship was strained. “Food is really important for any diaspora, and it’s really important for Korean people,” she says. “This was a connection my mom and I could always have. No matter what environment I was raised in, it was proof that I was her kid.” **ANGIE MARTOCCIO**

PREVIOUS SPREAD: JADA PINKETT SMITH AND ADRIENNE BANFIELD-JONES: HAIR BY NEEKO AT TRACEY MATTINGLY; MAKEUP BY LEANNE HIRSH AT THE REX AGENCY. SMITH: HAIR BY NAI/VASHA AT THE WALL GROUP; MAKEUP BY TASHA BROWN AT THE WALL GROUP; STYLING BY MARYAM MALAKPOUR FOR THE ONLY AGENCY. BANFIELD-JONES: DRESS BY BOTTEGA VENETA. SMITH AND PINKETT SMITH’S OUTFITS BY OLIVIA VON HALLE; SMITH’S EARRINGS BY TEMPLE ST. CLAIR; THIS PAGE: JACKET AND DRESS BY DIANE GOLDIE







KOFFEE

Making reggae hits powered by deep cultural roots and hope for a post-quarantine world

By Brittany Spanos

Photograph by Adrian McDonald



LAST SPRING, Koffee was looking forward to a pivotal year in her career. At 19 years old, she'd just won the Best Reggae Album Grammy for her 2019 EP, *Rapture*, making history as the first woman and the youngest artist ever to take home that award. Next up, she was slated to play Coachella in April 2020, finish recording her debut album, and perform for huge pop audiences in Mexico and South America as one of Harry Styles' opening acts in the fall.

A year later, Koffee isn't too disappointed about the way things turned out after stay-at-home directives kept her grounded in Jamaica instead. Thankfully, the island hasn't been hit as hard by Covid-19 as many other countries have been, and her family and friends have been safe and protected. She got to spend time with them while finding other ways to stay creative, like learning how to play piano and sharpening her music-reading skills. Even though her timeline for recording an album was pushed back, that didn't stop Koffee from sharing new music with the world – including the irrepressibly upbeat jam “Lockdown,” on which she looks forward to the joys awaiting us after the pandemic ends (“Where will we go/When the quarantine ting done and everybody touch road?”). “It's been a spiritual kind of year,” she says over Zoom. “I've learned a lot.”

Born Mikayla Simpson in Spanish Town, Jamaica, Koffee describes her childhood as “sheltered.” Her mother is a Seventh-day Adventist, so Koffee grew up attending church weekly. “She always tried to keep me safe,” she says. As a kid, Koffee wasn't very social, but knew she wanted to be a singer. Her love for music was born in the church choir, where she learned to sing. When she entered high school in Kingston, she considered pharmacology as her career. But her musical taste was beginning to change, shifting from gospel to a soulful, conscious brand of reggae that was beginning to gain popularity. Artists like Protoje, Chronixx, and Lila Iké inspired Koffee to teach herself how to play the guitar; the first song she learned was Protoje's “This Is Not a Marijuana Song.”

Of her debut album, Koffee says, “I want to speak of a solution and of a way that we can come together and get along, even when things are going wrong.”

At the time, Koffee's connection to reggae felt different from her peers' listening habits; their tastes were more mainstream, but the teenager felt deeply connected to the history and roots of the genre. “I took to reggae and just made my own path,” she says.

Her career began after she entered a singing competition by chance. Thinking it was a casual talent show, she signed up and performed a bit of music for her classmates. At the end of the day, she was brought to the school's music room with four other students, who were told that they were auditioning against one another. The competition became a formative experience in teaching her how the industry works and how to self-promote, as she rallied votes through social media and learned how to perform onstage for the final show: “I was really, really nervous when I went out, but the crowd really responded, so that helped me to glide along the earth.”

Soon Koffee was writing her own songs, inspired by courses in poetry and literature that she was taking in school. The first one she ever wrote, “Legend,” ended up changing her life. Inspired by Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt, it became a viral hit once Bolt himself heard and then shared the song on his Instagram.

With “Legend” gaining traction, the singer took on an old childhood nickname as her stage name. Friends had been calling her “Coffee” since the time she brought a cup of coffee to school on an unusually hot September day, at age 12. (The “C” turned to a “K” to mirror the spelling of her given name, Mikayla.) She followed her first hit with the single “Burning,” in 2017, swiftly becoming an international success; her 2018 follow-up, “Raggamuffin,” earned her a deal with Columbia Records.

For her upcoming debut LP, Koffee wants to focus on the idea of unity. “I want to speak of a solution and of a way that we can come together and get along, even when things are going wrong,” she says. “Positivity is definitely a theme. It will be a very interesting twist for people who knew my music before, and also for people who will discover me. I think it will be really awesome.”



YAMICHE ALCINDOR

How the PBS correspondent went toe-to-toe with Trump, demanding answers for a country in crisis

By EJ Dickson

Photograph by Nate Palmer

IT'S HARD FOR *PBS NewsHour's* Yamiche Alcindor to pick one moment that encapsulates the experience of covering the Trump White House. But if she had to choose, it would be in March, fairly early in the pandemic, when she took the mic at a press briefing and calmly asked President Trump why the White House had dismantled its pandemic-response office. "Well, I just think it's a nasty question," the president fumed. A few weeks later, in response to a question Alcindor asked about the availability of ventilators, he chided her again: "Be nice. Don't be threatening."

Trump's abrasive remarks to Alcindor went viral, with many pundits interpreting such comments as heavily loaded references to her race and gender. But Alcindor wasn't cowed. "My take: Be steady. Stay focused. Remember your purpose. And always press forward," she tweeted in response. "I felt obviously targeted because the president made it very clear that I was a target," she tells *ROLLING STONE*. "[But] at the end of the day, I felt like I was exactly where I needed to be in this moment."

Such resolve and clarity of purpose have sustained Alcindor throughout her journalism career. The child of Haitian immigrants, she was inspired to enter the field as a teenager by the story of

"I wanted to be a professional witness," says Alcindor. "I wanted to be someone who was bringing the hard truth to America."

Emmett Till, the 14-year-old boy who was brutally murdered in 1955 after a white woman falsely accused him of whistling at her. "I wanted to be a professional witness," she says. "I wanted to be someone who was bringing the hard truth to America, who was forcing the country to look at the flaws of these promises that we make to treat every man and woman equally and how we don't live up to that a lot of times."

Social, racial, and economic inequalities were brought into sharp relief in 2020. Through her reporting, Alcindor has borne witness to injustice in all forms, interviewing everyone from Amazon workers to Mexican immigrants seeking asylum to black and brown families on the South Side of Chicago who have been hard hit by Covid.

Alcindor, 34, came to *PBS NewsHour* in 2018 from *The New York Times*, where she'd covered the Trump and Sanders campaigns. One of the primary lures was the fact that her mentor, the late Gwen Ifill, had served as a *NewsHour* anchor for years. Now Alcindor is herself in the position of serving as a guidepost and mentor. "I have a 10-year-old daughter who would watch Yamiche on TV at these press conferences and was so enthralled to see a black woman standing up to the president," says writer Nikole Hannah-Jones, who worked with Alcindor at the *Times*. "I'd text Yamiche and say, 'It means so much to see your strength and professionalism on TV in the face of a man who did not show that in return.'"

Having never covered a sitting president before, reporting on Trump was something of a learning curve for Alcindor. "I had to learn how to jump in, how to really press my question, how to not be cut off," she says. Alcindor was also forced to contend with curveballs she didn't anticipate, such as members of the Trump administration and the White House press corps contracting Covid, forcing her to consider her safety. Though she cut back on her hours in the briefing room, she ultimately made the decision to continue on the beat. "When I think of my life's mission, I really didn't think it was a choice not to go at all," says Alcindor. "Because I knew that this was a country that needed answers."

With Trump gone, she no longer has to deal with a compulsively mendacious, racist president, but she thinks the aftershocks of the Trump administration and the chaos of 2020 will linger for decades to come. "I think gone are the days where if the president says one thing, we just assume that's the reality, [and that's also true] about the racial reckoning in this country," she says. "Gone

are the days where police say one thing about how a shooting occurred and we just take that at face value. I think now we have to dig deep, and it's really about boots-on-the-ground reporting. Those are lessons of the Trump era that I hope stick around." 🗣️

PREVIOUS SPREAD (KOFFEE): PRODUCED AND STYLED BY TAMO ENNIS. HAIR AND MAKEUP BY MICHELLE CLARKE. FLOWERS BY TERRENSIA VERNON OF GALERIA EVENTS.

“WE’RE NEVER REALLY quite satisfied with anything we do,” says Elizabeth Diller, founding partner of the ultramodern architecture firm Diller Scofidio + Renfro. It’s not quite a humblebrag, more a lingering anxiety about her most famous creation: New York’s High Line.

When the first section of the elevated park opened in Manhattan, in 2009, it transformed the island’s west side. Once a dilapidated train track, the High Line is now flanked by luxury condos and office buildings designed by the world’s leading architects. But as she watched the area rapidly gentrify – driving out longtime residents – it began to gnaw at Diller, who’s lived in Manhattan since her family emigrated from Poland when she was a child. “The question is, ‘How do you prevent that from happening?’ Would we have designed it any differently? No,” she says. “I couldn’t make it any less good. We have to design forward, and we have to make the best things that we could possibly imagine making. And if they’re popular, so be it.”

It’s this sort of focus on community issues that has motivated Diller, 66, since the beginning, and has continued to inform her work. Going to high school in West Harlem in the late 1960s, she was preoccupied with the era’s social unrest and skipped school to take part in the movement. “There were anti-war protests; students were really active. I just don’t remember a single day of high school,” she says. When she started attending Cooper Union in the 1970s, it was a creative hotbed and home to avant-garde design. Initially intent on being an artist or filmmaker, Diller was quickly seduced by architecture. “I got interested in alternative strategies in space-making,” she explains.

Even then, she was more interested in the East Village music and art scene than she was in classes. But it was one of the school’s design professors, Ricardo Scofidio, who became her lifelong partner. After she graduated in 1979, they moved into a loft on Cooper Square and set up an office. They were conceptual artists, known more for darkly comic design hacks than actual buildings. Their 1994 book, *Flesh*, a compendium of their thoughts and designs, put forward the idea that “anything can be architecture.” “When we started the practice, we simply wanted to observe the ordinary. We wanted to question it,” she says. “We wanted to question habits of space.”

In 1999, they became the first architects and second married couple to receive a coveted MacArthur “genius” grant, and in 2002, they attracted worldwide attention for their Blur Building – a pavilion that sprayed jets of mist to create a nimbus cloud into which visitors could walk – at that year’s Swiss Expo. Their 2003 Whitney Museum retrospective – which displayed water glasses that incorporated hypodermic needles and an installation of white dress shirts ironed into origami-like constructions – included a robot that drilled holes in the gallery walls, creating



Elizabeth Diller

She questioned the very concept of architecture, and became one of the most sought-after designers of her generation

By Jerry Portwood

noise and dust throughout the exhibition, an act of resistance against the very institution that was celebrating their work.

Over the years they tackled complex projects with major institutions – Boston’s Institute of Contemporary Art; a reimagining of Lincoln Center – but it was the Broad Museum in 2015 that proved to be a milestone. Located alongside Frank Gehry’s Walt Disney Concert Hall in L.A., it houses the majority of billionaires Eli and Edythe Broad’s contemporary art collection – full of works by Jeff Koons, Andy Warhol, and Jean-Michel Basquiat. In some ways, it’s a simple white-box gallery, but the concrete “veil” that shrouds the building became an instant icon, helping cement Diller’s singular status within her generation.

Amid all the building, Diller continues to envision nimble solutions to transform our world. In 2019, she opened the Shed, a flexible arts

space on a small strip of public land alongside New York’s Hudson Yards. The year before, she launched the Mile-Long Opera, a large-scale performance work she created with composer David Lang that included a thousand people chanting and singing across the length of the High Line. It was an attempt to creatively reclaim the space and remind people how special it can be – when it’s not bottlenecked with tourists.

“The opera was totally ground up,” she says. “I had to raise the money and get the talent together and get the permissions and figure out how to do it. . . . I feel that architects should do things that they’re totally unqualified to do.”

DS+R remains a collaborative practice – more than a hundred architects, designers, artists, and researchers work on projects around the globe. But it’s hard not to see Diller as the operation’s oracle: She has a knack for navigating clashing agendas within cultural institutions and can persuade even the toughest pragmatists by relentlessly arguing for her ideas with airtight reasoning. “You don’t fuck around with her,” says Thom Mayne, the Pritzker Prize-winning architect whose firm is often up for the same commissions. “She’s got a mind that works at the speed of light. There’s really no other figure in this country who does more interesting work.”

Yet unlike Mayne, Diller has not won the Pritzker, the industry’s highest award. Sarah Whiting, dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Design, who previously taught alongside Diller at Princeton, believes Diller’s work may be too conceptual to be nominated. The award recognizes buildings, not projects that challenge the notion of what architects do. “Or maybe it’s the issue of not playing the ego card as much as the guys in the profession have,” adds Whiting. “I don’t feel like she’s constantly articulating ‘Liz-ness.’”

Similarly, Diller is surprised whenever their avant-garde firm is picked for jobs. “I’m wondering why we ever actually win competitions, because we’re sometimes almost shooting ourselves in the foot,” she quips. Take, for example, Moscow’s Zaryadye Park, which opened in 2017, steps away from Red Square. “They discouraged making a big space for gatherings – we did just the opposite,” she explains. “Our design was an act of resistance against traditional park planning in Moscow, which is often landscaped with a sanctioned list of trees, shrubs, and plantings that you’re typically not allowed to walk on.” Instead, they used indigenous Russian plants to create large spaces for people to gather. “We felt like we had no shot, it was just good to participate. So we were shocked when we won and our plans were more or less protected.” After it opened, there were reports that people were caught on security cameras having sex in the park, inciting some to say Westerners were corrupting Russia. “But I thought that it was a real badge of honor,” she says. “That we let people feel uninhibited and they were having intimate relations – what could be better than that?” 

KEISHA LANCE BOTTOMS

How the mayor of Atlanta and rising star in the Democratic Party led her city through a tumultuous year

By Tessa Stuart

Photograph by Braylen Dion

THE PAST YEAR of Keisha Lance Bottoms' life has been, to borrow one of the Atlanta mayor's favorite euphemisms, *interesting*. When she's got nothing nice to say about a situation, Bottoms, diplomatic Southerner that she is, reaches for this damningly anodyne descriptor. It's all in the delivery. Consider, for example, the fact that in the middle of a pandemic killing black Georgians by the thousands, Republican Gov. Brian Kemp had the nerve to sue to block a mask mandate from going into effect in the city of Atlanta – and only the city of Atlanta. “He sued me, personally, which was *interesting*,” Bottoms says. “And what was really *interesting* about that is the fact Van Johnson, the mayor of Savannah, had gone out first with the mask mandate.”

Over the past 12 months, Bottoms has not only had to shepherd her city through a deadly virus while battling a governor determined to undermine the public-health measures she put in place, she also had to negotiate a fragile peace between protesters and police when demonstrations over the death of George Floyd turned destructive in late May. Bottoms issued an emotional plea to the community, only to see the detente shattered barely two weeks later when an Atlanta police officer shot Rayshard Brooks, an unarmed black man, in a Wendy's parking lot. Through it all, she's been raising four children, dealt with a Covid-19 outbreak in her own home, and been vetted to be Joe Biden's vice president, while conducting the other business that comes with running the biggest city in Georgia.

Bottoms acquired the kind of resilience needed to reckon with the highs and lows of a year like 2020 early in life. She was born in Atlanta in 1970,

the daughter of the R&B singer Major Lance, an *American Bandstand* performer and opener for the Beatles. She remembers watching women jump up onstage to rip her father's clothes off at the Torch, a club in England, and tagging along with him to daytime meetings at the Blue Flame, a legendary Atlanta strip club.

Despite his fame, Lance struggled to make money off of his music, and eventually it just wasn't enough for the family to survive on. When that happened, Bottoms' mother took two jobs and went to cosmetology school at night to help keep the family afloat, while her father turned to selling cocaine. When she was eight years old, she came home to a police raid from which her dad was led away in handcuffs.

When she eventually set her sights on law school, and entertainment law specifically, it was with the idea of avenging the injustices visited on her father – or at least making sure that other artists didn't suffer a similar fate. “My dad and I would talk about that,” she says. “I would go back and I would get all of the money from the record company that he never made.” Instead, she ended up working first in juvenile court, representing children, then as a magistrate judge, before she got the idea of running for superior judge. Bottoms lost that race but mounted and won a bid for the Atlanta City Council. In 2017, she emerged from a crowded field of candidates to become mayor.

In her first year, Bottoms was left to contend with a federal corruption investigation left over by her predecessor, a high-stakes fight for the city to retain control of Atlanta's airport, and a massive cyberattack that virtually shut down the city government for nearly a week. She managed it all while shoring up progressive bona fides – issuing an executive order refusing to house ICE detainees at the city jail and later appointing the city's first director of LGBTQ Affairs.

Even as that first year felt like a baptism by fire, it couldn't have prepared her for 2020. Bottoms recalls the surreal moment in early March when she realized things were about to change. She was hosting a briefing on the virus with one of the top infectious-disease experts in the country offering a sober assessment of the situation facing Atlanta.

“I remember looking around the room, and I wish I had a more descriptive word, but the room looked shook,” Bottoms says of an early Covid-19 briefing last March.

“I just remember looking around the room, and I wish I had a more descriptive word, but the room looked shook,” Bottoms says. “He essentially said to us, ‘If you don't close the city down within the next 48 to 72 hours, it will be too late.’”

In July, Bottoms' family was touched personally by the virus. She knew something was wrong when her husband was abnormally fatigued. “He couldn't complete a sentence without drifting off to sleep,” she says. A testing backlog in the city meant it took almost a week to confirm they'd contracted the virus. Her teenage son was asymp-

tomatic, she herself only had mild symptoms (“a little coughing here and there”), but months later, her husband is still feeling the lingering effects. “He lost 20 pounds in probably four days. He still has the fatigue and the headaches, and his sense of smell didn't leave when he had Covid, but it now comes and goes. You know, the long-hauler stuff.”

If all of that weren't enough, Bottoms is now grappling with a sharp rise in violent crime on the heels of a police strike last June. With 157 homicides, 2020 was the deadliest year in decades. Figuring out how to turn things around will be the biggest challenge of 2021 – the last year of Bottoms' first term. She's pledged to run for re-election, a commitment reinforced by her recent decision to turn down a position as the head of the Small Business Administration for Biden.

SBA administrator is a slightly lower-profile job than the other one Bottoms was in consideration for – the job that ultimately went to Kamala Harris. “The vet was quite *interesting*,” Bottoms says, before admitting, more bluntly: “It was quite uncomfortable. You are asked about everything – I even got asked questions about high school... the address that I used in high school: *Whose address was it?*” She was determined to see the process through, convinced that if she was on the ticket, she could put Biden over the top. “I kept telling him, ‘If you put me on the ticket, I am sure we will win Georgia,’” she says, laughing. “So, obviously, he didn't need me on the ticket to win Georgia.” Still, she says, when the results came in, “I had a nice smile on my face because I thought, ‘I told you we could win this state!’”

HAIR BY LISA POPE. MAKEUP BY MARIELA PEREZ. NECKLACE BY TORY BURCH.



AT THE TAIL END of *Time* – the feature-length documentary that, since its heralded Sundance debut last year, has deservedly made its director, Garrett Bradley, one of the film world’s women of the hour – an extraordinary thing happens. The movie follows a black family living in the shadow of incarceration. At the center of that family is Sibil Richardson, known as Fox Rich, whose husband, Robert, is serving a 60-year sentence for a crime the two of them committed when they were young, newly married, and desperate. The film is a stunning, surprising mix of present-tense footage (filmed by Bradley and others) and video diaries Rich has been compiling over the course of 21 years – footage shot to show Robert all that he’s missing of his wife and kids while in prison. But then, in the end, comes the moment the two threads merge: Robert is released. And a film that has to that point been almost entirely defined by the man’s absence disarms us with his presence – and with the cosmic, all-consuming, full-body kind of love that makes justice feel possible. Robert and Fox do exactly what you’d expect them to do. They reclaim the intimacy that incarceration has denied. They have sex. Right there, during the ride home, in the back seat. With the camera rolling.

Speaking by Zoom from the sunny Los Angeles apartment that’s become her home away from home for much of the pandemic, Bradley explains just how she got Fox and Robert to allow her so far into the tragedy, to say nothing of the intimacy, of their lives. A serious artist who does not take herself too seriously, she makes it sound pretty simple: “I was in the car behind them,” she says, instructing her camerawoman, Nisa East, who was hunched in the front passenger seat of Robert and Fox’s car. East wondered what to do. “I was like, ‘Girl, just shoot that shit in slow motion, and be in tune with them. Make eye contact with them,’” Bradley recounts. “‘They’ll let you know when it’s time to turn the camera off.’” But Bradley also sensed – rightly – that Fox and Robert were in a world of their own.

Trust, then, is the answer. Bradley trusts her collaborators. And she goes out of her way to earn the trust of her subjects.



Garrett Bradley

With her shattering and intimate documentary ‘Time,’ the filmmaker is pushing the boundaries of what the art form can be

By K. Austin Collins Photograph by blvxnth

Born in New York to artist parents, Bradley studied religion at Smith College and film at UCLA, with sudden, spirited travels to the South, specifically Louisiana, to delve into its steep sense of history and implication. She became a filmmaker almost by chance – a high school teacher encouraged her early on to submit a film to a festival, and, to her surprise, she won. The validation was overwhelming. “I really struggled academically,” she says, “and it was the very first time someone had said to me, ‘You’re really good at this. You should keep doing this.’ Image-making for me was like, ‘Oh, I can communicate, and I can find a way to communicate with the world.’”

What she has communicated across her career thus far, which includes a handful of short films, a fiction feature shot in Louisiana (her thesis film), and now *Time*, is a nimble curiosity about the role of images in shaping, or obscuring, the reality of

human experience – spiritual, political, racial, and beyond. Bradley is that rare mix: an experimenter whose work makes incredible sense and yields unnerving power. Her documentary shorts – among them *Alone* (2017), another film about a young woman whose partner is imprisoned – have typically drawn financial support from journalistic institutions such as *The New York Times’* Op-Docs and First Look Media’s Field of Vision. They are films that do the work expected of them in that context, taking some newsy cultural dilemma familiar from headlines (incarceration, for example, or, in the case of *Like*, the Facebook “click” industrial complex) and rendering it in unusually interior terms. Bradley gives you the news, but she also tends to give you something more: the fraught, unnameable feelings underlying those factual bullet points.

This is, in part, simply practical. “The first paid opportunities that I got to make a film were through these journalistic platforms,” Bradley says. “And there was no way in hell I was going to say, ‘No, I’m not a journalist. No, I don’t make documentaries.’” Nor does she go out of her way to treat this funding like an artistic imperative. She finds a coherent, personal vision within these frameworks. “If someone is giving me money to make something, I’m going to do the best that I can to do it on my terms, the way that I think is interesting within the parameters I’m being given.” Ultimately, Bradley says, it “was the only way I was going to get my foot in the door and to be able to make something that people could see.”

As her own work more than implies, Bradley’s approach is hardly limited to the practical. If anything, making aesthetically rich nonfiction that surpasses infotainment has motivated her to think more deeply: about images, about what nonfiction even means (or doesn’t). “I think we have this idea in journalism and in documentary filmmaking that in order for something to be real, in order for it to be the truth, we need to see people in moments of weakness,” she says. “We need to see them losing, we need to see them crying, breaking down, revealing things that maybe they wouldn’t [normally] reveal, in a bedroom somewhere. And in my mind, I’m really invested in what it means to lean into the way people present themselves in the world, and that that is also a truth. That doesn’t take away from my power as a filmmaker.”

The truth is paying off. *Time* was acquired by Amazon Studios after Sundance and has been feted by critics, awards groups, and audiences alike. Her next project, which is already in progress, is a Netflix documentary series on another woman of the hour: the whip-smart, unabashedly political tennis star Naomi Osaka. Given the through lines of Bradley’s work – of history, images, blackness, justice – one can only imagine where such a project will go. It will undoubtedly strike, again, at the truths of her work, the essence of which, as she puts it, gets “at the heart of what justice looks like and the complexity of what justice is.”



PALOMA MAMI

One of 2021's most exciting new pop voices is a Chilean American who's blending R&B, reggaeton, and her own unique style

By Stefanie Fernández

DANIEL TOLEDO

● ● ● ● PALOMA ROCÍO CASTILLO ASTORGA was just 18 when she wrote her first song. She self-released it as a single – “Not Steady,” a gauzy, Spanglish R&B reproach to an overzealous suitor – with a music video that she filmed in the parking lot of her *tía*’s apartment complex. Within a few months, she became the first Chilean American artist to sign to Sony Music Latin. “Literally, ‘Not Steady’ was the first song I ever wrote, ever sang, ever recorded,” she says.

That was almost three years ago. Right now, she’s trying to stay very still so as not to disrupt her Wi-Fi: She recently moved into a new place, in Santiago, Chile. It’s a change of pace from how she spent much of 2020, quarantining and recording her upcoming debut album in Puerto Rico. “Honestly, if it hadn’t been for making music, I don’t know what I would have been doing,” says the singer, 21, who records as Paloma Mami. “Going crazy, probably.”

Born in New York to Chilean parents, Paloma grew up in uptown Manhattan, where she fell in love with genres from R&B to Latin pop. Her father is an architect and her mother worked in interior design. Each gave her a distinct artistic inheritance. “My mom was *obsessed* with Marc Anthony,” she remembers. Her father introduced her to Amy Winehouse, Gwen Stefani, and Avril Lavigne. “I had my little

punk-rock moment like everybody did,” she says, with a laugh. She remembers always being surrounded by jazz, citing Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, and Frank Sinatra.

New York was its own teacher. At her school, which was made up of mostly white students, she’d ask classmates to call her “P,” modulating her middle name from Rocío to Rose. She heard reggaeton by Daddy Yankee and Don Omar while growing up in the city and during her summer visits to Chile, a bridge that connected her to a musical identity that felt like home.

At 16, Paloma was at what she calls “the peak of [her] rebellion.” She’d skip school often – she recalls a total of about three months’ cumulative absence. When her mother found out, she was “devastated.” “We were all . . . breaking apart in a way, me, my sister, and my mom,” she says. They ended up moving to Chile, where they’d be closer to family and away from the expenses of New York. “I thought it was going to be the worst thing, and it ended up being the best thing that ever happened,” Paloma says.

In Chile, she began to pursue music for the first time, outside of karaoke and family parties. She appeared on a Chilean TV talent competition and dropped out after two weeks, disillusioned with the lack of creative control. Before long, “Not Steady” was a hit and Sony signed her. “Believing in yourself gets you far, guys!” she says.

The fame, and the whiplash, were instant. “I was all over the place,” she says. “That was the hardest thing to overcome: to realize that . . . none of it is real.” Her 2019 single “Don’t Talk About Me” is a rebuke to the haters from middle school and high school, and the new ones who say she’s “not Chilean enough.”

Paloma hopes to see the music industry stop doubting women, especially early in their careers. From the start, she was wary of doing guest features, recalling the pressure to hop on tracks with “the biggest artist of the moment.” “Usually at that time, it was always a guy,” she says. In 2019, she released “Mami,” a song honoring the power of the feminine archetype, without which, she sings, “there’s no heaven *ni reyes*.” The song samples Puerto Rican reggaeton pioneer Ivy Queen’s 2003 song “Quiero Bailar,” echoing its theme of feminist autonomy.

In October, Chileans voted with a 78 percent majority to replace the country’s constitution, imposed in 1980 under Augusto Pinochet’s regime. “It’s a beautiful country that has been suppressed for a very long time, and the people are taking it back,” Paloma says. She admires her country’s teenagers, including the metro-fare protesters who catalyzed a movement against economic inequality in late 2019.

This year, Paloma is excited to keep writing her own story. “I have a lot of . . .” She trails off. “Actually, let me not tell you,” she says, with a self-assured laugh. “Surprise.” 

“Chile is a beautiful country that has been suppressed, and the people are taking it back.”

AYO EDEBIRI

As a writer and actor on 'Big Mouth,' the comedian is bringing a fresh perspective to the fore

● ● ● ● AYO EDEBIRI still remembers the first joke she ever told. She was in eighth grade and had just joined the improv team at her school in Boston. She was a nerdy teen, fond of writing fan fiction about *Twilight*'s Jacob Black. Improv was not an obvious fit. Then she made a crack about why Christians' favorite cheese was Swiss: "Because it's holy," she says, rolling her eyes. "People thought that was funny."

The 25-year-old's comic sensibility has matured considerably since then. She's currently a writer for Netflix's hilariously profane animated series about puberty, *Big Mouth*, where she's started voicing Missy, a similarly awkward black teen with a predilection for writing steamy fan fic and humping her Glo Worm. In her stand-up and on her Comedy Central series *Ayo and Rachel Are Single*, co-created with Rachel Sennott, she's joked about everything from getting too high on edibles to people constantly asking her to have a threesome (what she calls having "the energy of a third").

Growing up in a religious Pentecostal household, Edebiri had limited exposure to comedy. But while a student at NYU, she became inspired by Keisha Zollar and Monique Moses, members of Upright Citizens Brigade's first all-black sketch group. Now, Edebiri is bringing Missy to life just as *Big Mouth*'s writers have begun exploring the character's identity. (The original actor, Jenny Slate, who is white, stepped down amid widespread discussions about representation.) She also has a spot in the writers room for the upcoming Netflix series *Mulligan* and a plum role in the second season of Apple TV+'s *Dickinson*, as hair-care entrepreneur/clairvoyant maid Hattie. But she maintains a Missy-esque attitude toward her meteoric rise. "People keep saying [I'm blowing up], but it certainly doesn't feel like it," she says wryly. "I can normalize pretty much anything in my mind." EJ DICKSON



MYLES LOFTIN



Suzy Shinn

A rising rock engineer and producer who's had to fight to be respected for her talent in the studio

SUZY SHINN grew up listening to bands like Something Corporate and Jack's Mannequin, so she was thrilled when Andrew McMahon, the vocalist in both bands, called in December with the beginnings of a solo song. The only problem: They had about three days to finish the track. So she set up in her living room in L.A.'s Los Feliz, called a couple of masked friends, and made do. "I think I used a can of salt as my shaker," says Shinn, 29.

Shinn has made a name for herself as one of modern rock's savviest engineers, working with acts like Panic! at the Disco and Fall Out Boy — feats that are even more impressive as an Asian American woman in a field where a recent USC study of 500 songs found that just 1.6 percent of producers were women of color.

After growing up in Kansas, Shinn studied production and engineering at the Berklee College of Music, where she remembers facing double standards. "Everywhere I'd go, people would think I'm a dumb blonde," she says. "I had female professors ask me to switch out of their class because it 'looked like I wasn't getting it.'" She moved to L.A. at 20, working without pay at a studio between waitressing shifts at a strip club. "I'd be back at the studio at 11 a.m.," she says, "cleaning toilets, tuning vocals, and recording."

Shinn says she's lost out on jobs because of her gender, along with other affronts she'd rather not detail. "People will be like, 'Where the fuck is my coffee?'" she says, before insisting: "I always want the job because I'm the best person for it."

Last year, she got her biggest gig yet: producing Weezer's next LP. "They were like, 'Should we go to this guy or this guy?'" she says. "Rivers [Cuomo] was like, 'I like working with Suzy. Why can't we go to this girl?'" **SAMANTHA HISSONG**

MARISA ACOCELLA

With her latest book, the cartoonist brings history's forgotten women back into the picture

MARISA ACOCELLA was raised in a devout Catholic family. But one of the Bible's main teachings bugged her. "I always thought, 'How could a male God give birth to all this?'" Acocella says, gesturing at... everything. "It never made sense to me. There had to be a God the Mother." The question nagged her all through her childhood in Roselle Park, New Jersey, her college years studying art at Brooklyn's Pratt Institute, her early jobs in advertising in the Eighties. In 1992, while she was working on her first comic strip, "She," for *Mirabella* magazine, another idea for a title popped into her head: *The Big She-Bang*. Which just so happens to be the name of her latest graphic novel, published last fall.

The Big She-Bang (subtitle: *The Herstory of the Universe According to God the Mother*) is a historical corrective that retells the tale of human existence through a feminist lens. A dizzying trip through wormholes of theology and spiritual ideology, the book highlights goddesses, female divinities, and real women who've been downplayed or stripped from the record. You'll meet Sophia, a so-called divine twin to Jesus; Hypatia, a Hellenistic philosopher executed by religious zealots; and Pope Joan, who was exactly what she sounds like. Acocella did a year's worth of research, consulting close to 50 books on everything from Buddhist scriptures to Mayan texts to inform her work.

"I loved doing deep dives into Mary Magdalene," she says. "Did you know she was a princess? And then she was sex-trafficked when she was 16. The more I dove in, the more I wanted to know."

Acocella, 60, has been a have-it-all kind of feminist her entire life. "She" was a *Sex and the City* precursor that followed Acocella's alter ego through her time as a high-powered but unfulfilled Manhattan ad exec dating cute but unfulfilling men and wearing expensive but very fulfilling shoes. (She comes by that love honestly — her mother designed heels for Jackie Kennedy.) That strip begat a book, *Just Who the Hell Is She Anyway?*, which led Acocella to pursue cartooning full time. Soon, she was landing spots in *The New Yorker*, where her work is still featured.

Her second book, *Cancer Vixen*, is an illustrated memoir that kicks off with the discovery of a tumor in her breast at 43, three weeks before her wedding. A frank and often hilarious account of the doctor appointments and chemo sessions that followed, it also charts a fairy-tale love story that sadly ended in divorce 12 years later. But that experience led her to finally write the book she'd been musing about for a lifetime. "Going through the divorce, it was hard for me to find my voice," Acocella says. "I was trying to figure out who I was as an artist. That's when I went back to these stories. And the more I dived into the stories of women being gaslighted, scapegoated, minimized, the stronger my voice got."

She-Bang is hardly a condemnation of the opposite sex. Throughout, Acocella explores the notion that a balance of male and female energies is foundational to many creation myths. "[The Bible tries] to do that with Mary Magdalene and Jesus," she notes. "I'm still finding stuff out. I'm going to have to do another volume." **MARIA FONTOURA**





Erskine (top)
and Konkle

ANNA KONKLE & MAYA ERSKINE

TO SEE Anna Konkle and Maya Erskine without braces, slumped shoulders, and their signature hairdos – bowl cut for Erskine, strategic strands rigidly framing her face for Konkle – is a bit disorienting. Their *Pen15* characters, middle schoolers Anna Kone and Maya Ishii-Peters, are so comforting in their awkwardness, such perfect avatars for the 13-year-old that lives inside all of us, that meeting them as grown-ups, with their hair down, a little lip gloss on, wearing normal clothes, is kind of like finding out Batman is Bruce Wayne, or seeing a teacher at the mall. In real life, the masters of teen trauma are self-assured, engaging, quite beautiful, and, as of mid-January, both very pregnant. A coincidence, but somehow an unsurprising one.

“It’s so embarrassing, like, ‘Oh, yeah, we do everything together,’ but also magical,” says Erskine, Zooming from the sunny office of her new home in Los Angeles. “We saw each other for the first time the other day, socially distanced. We’ve

The co-creators of ‘*Pen15*’ have shown that girls can be just as gross and weird as boys — and that our inner 13-year-old never dies

By Maria Fontoura

been able to talk on the phone about our pregnancies, but not hang out or hug. Anna came over to see the house, and we touched each other’s bellies, and it was like – we almost bawled.”

Being pregnant during a pandemic would be emotional for anyone, but these two really live in their feelings. It’s the reason *Pen15* transcends the sketch-show gimmickry of its conceit – two thirtysomething women playing themselves at 13,

opposite actual adolescents – to reach into your heart and wring out all the stuff that’s been stuck in there since you, too, were a confused, temperamental, insecure middle schooler. It’s also what makes it riotously funny. The physical gag of adult women pretending to be kids quickly becomes beside the point. (In fact, it’s alarming how easy it is to forget that they are not teenagers.) What’s left, thanks to the co-creators’ brutally honest writing, is the crystallized experience of middle school in all its wretchedness and absurdity, reconstructed with enough distance to pinpoint both the humor and the pain. This isn’t *The Wonder Years*. It’s the “WTF Years.”

“There are so many funny and fucked-up and sad memories within the in-between time of childhood and high school,” says Konkle. “You’re not a child, and you’re not a teen. You’re experiencing sexual things, and your brain is changing, and your body is betraying you. It felt like, ‘I want to talk about the first time I was fingered. It hurt.

BEN RITTER / “THE NEW YORK TIMES” / REDUX

And it was funny. I was pretending I liked it, and then I walked around with a waddle for a day, because he didn't know what the fuck he was doing. He was, like, mining for gold.' The more shameful was the funnier stuff to us, and we thought that would not be accepted. But more people seem to appreciate the secret-telling, the stuff that we were told not to talk about."

People love to call actors "brave," usually for things like gaining 30 pounds or wearing a prosthetic nose or, for women, being "unlikable." But dressing as yourself in seventh grade and furiously masturbating on a set that looks exactly like your childhood bedroom, that's brave.

The degree of specificity woven into the show is what makes it so visceral, even if you weren't 13 in the year 2000. The bad fashions may have been tie-dye, not stone-wash, and the toys may have been Cabbage Patch Dolls, not My Little Pony, but the desperate first crushes, the melodramatic lashing out at parents, the withering self-loathing are the same. Konkle and Erskine are meticulous about everything, from the outfits they wear to the cars their onscreen parents drive. That texture is what allows them to dig deeper when they re-create the experience of being bullied at a slumber party or fumbling through a first kiss.

"It's so funny, because a lot of people say, 'How did you guys remember that? Did you look at journals?'" Erskine says. "I'm like, 'That shit is imprinted in my brain. I cannot get rid of it.'

Because your brain is forming at that time. You're becoming an adult. So every experience that's traumatic, or any experience at all, is there forever. I think some people maybe just choose to repress it or block it out of their minds."

Konkle and Erskine have been sharing their mortifying stories since they became close as students in NYU's experimental-theater program. They weren't writing partners right away, just friends and confidantes as they struggled through their postgrad years in New York, going to auditions, waiting tables, and doing free-theater gigs. But once they started making work together – a last hurrah before Konkle planned to quit acting – they discovered they were ideal collaborators, both with an offbeat sense of humor and a rip-the-Band-Aid-off forthrightness.

Their "batshit insane" web series, *Project Reality*, which spoofed rejected reality-show pilots, got them an agent, despite having "200 views," Konkle says. *Girls* had just come out, so Hollywood was hot on female creators. Suddenly, the pair found themselves in meeting after meeting, being asked what kind of show they'd want to make. Being called creators "helped us to think of ourselves that way," Konkle says. "Then there's been a huge catch-up period that has not stopped, literally, until yesterday. We'd had some writing in school and some directing in school, but it's just been a

lot of [saying], 'We can do that,' and then being like, 'Fuck, we need to learn how to do that.'"

Much of the learning curve for *Pen15* has involved not just the ins and outs of showrunning, but figuring out where (or whether) to draw the line with content that could lean surprisingly dark. Initially, they thought the show would be pure comedy, built around what Erskine calls "the circus freakishness" of middle school. But as they workshopped the concept with their friend and third co-creator, Sam Zvibleman, and eventually gathered a writers room (a process that took six years), they determined that "the stuff that sticks are the things that we're most embarrassed to talk about," Erskine says, "or that caused us so much pain." Thus we have the episode where Anna learns her parents are getting a divorce, or one where Maya wakes to casual racism, with classmates teasing her about being "tan" and ordering her to fetch drinks – which made Erskine break down on set. "There's never been a story that we feel like, 'Oh, we shouldn't talk about it,'" Erskine says. "It's usually when it feels raw that we're like, 'OK, what's that? Let's keep talking about that.'"

"There's never been a story that we feel like, 'We shouldn't talk about it.' It's usually when it feels raw that we're, 'OK, what's that? Let's talk about that.'"

Konkle echoes this idea of running headlong into the fear – not for shock value, but with intention. "When we realized throughout the writers room over and over and over that the moments that we wanted to talk about scared us, we had a debate: 'Is this an important thing to show? Why haven't we been

seeing this in the media if it is important? And who are we to say that this is important?'" Konkle says. "Having each other gave us the courage to be like, 'No, no, no, everyone needs to see you masturbate. We have to share what really happened, and stop letting shame lead what we do as actresses and writers.'"

Konkle and Erskine haven't conquered these uncomfortable moments just because they've aired them on TV. They're still processing how that formative time has metastasized, where it lives in them and why. Erskine says she "never" tires of talking about middle school: "I feel like all the things that affect me now are from that time."

Our time with Maya and Anna, though, is winding down. The intention was always to focus the series strictly on seventh grade. Six days of filming remain on the second half of Season Two – they're hoping their postpartum bodies cooperate with their costumes – and then the events of *Pen15* will conclude with Season Three. While the real Maya and Anna will carry around their 13-year-old selves forever, they may end up missing the terrifying freedom of revealing them to the world. "There are times when I do feel more like my authentic self in that costume and on that set," Konkle says. "I don't have to pretend that I've figured this out. I don't have to cope. I don't have to sit up straight. I can just let all of my insecurities out." ®

Kim Ng

MLB's first female GM brings her street smarts to the front office

FIVE TIMES OVER the past 15 years, reports surfaced that Kim Ng was about to become the first female general manager in Major League Baseball. In 2005, she interviewed for the job with the Los Angeles Dodgers. In 2009, she was considered by the San Diego Padres. So it went, until last November, when Miami Marlins co-owner Derek Jeter finally gave her the nod. Ng, 52, calls the position a "dream," even if it was excruciating each time she lost out to a man (which she says happened more than five times). "At the end of the day, you keep the faith, and just keep plugging away, because really, there's no choice," Ng says. Besides, she adds, "If you're in baseball, you're fairly measured. We play 162 games [a year]. To be emotional on a daily basis is not good for your health."

Growing up in Queens, Ng played stickball and tennis, and learned a love of baseball from her dad, who rooted for the Yankees over their neighborhood Mets. After attending the University of Chicago, where she played Division III softball, she scored a gig with the White Sox, who needed an intern; she ended up staying for six years. Her career then took her from the office of the American League to her beloved Yankees, where she served as assistant GM to Brian Cashman, to the Los Angeles Dodgers, and to SVP of baseball operations for MLB. All the while, Ng never gave up on the hope that she'd make her way to the top. "I've always had to elbow my way in," she says. "At times it has been uncomfortable, but you have to do it. You want to play stickball with the guys, you just have to get through it." ELISABETH GARBBER-PAUL





IT WAS a small shimmer of light at the end of a long, dark tunnel when, in December, vaccines were declared safe, effective, and ready for distribution – for pretty much everyone, that is, except pregnant women. For them, an extra layer of anxiety was grafted onto the process: The World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention were, for a time, at odds over whether moms-to-be, who’d been barred from clinical trials, should receive the shot. It’s in moments like these when expectant parents have turned to Emily Oster – economist, Brown University professor, and pregnancy and parenthood guru – for guidance.

Oster’s first book, 2014’s *Expecting Better*, mined scientific data to dismantle conventional wisdom around pregnancy and included, famously, the revelation that an occasional glass of wine is probably fine. She followed it up with 2019’s *Cribsheet*, a bestseller, which scrutinized studies about sleep training and breastfeeding. For her third book, *The Family Firm*, due in August, Oster is flipping the script: Instead of offering answers, she’s giving parents an economist’s framework to work through their questions themselves – basically, a cost-benefit-analysis how-to. Just in time, too. Amid the challenges of Covid-19, parents are forced to make high-stakes decisions with very little, often imperfect information.

One of the most pressing queries Oster has confronted in the past year is whether it’s safe to send kids to school. “I wanted to figure out the

Emily Oster

The economist and bestselling author helps families find answers amid Covid

answer, and to figure out who was collecting information on this,” she says. “And I kind of realized nobody was.”

So she started collecting the information herself. The result was the Covid-19 School Response Dashboard, a clearinghouse of data collected from schools around the country, including the mitigation strategies being employed and the number of confirmed cases. It was the first effort to systematically track how schools were responding to the crisis. But when people

began to draw sweeping conclusions from the data – including the Trump-appointed head of the CDC, who cited it as proof that schools weren’t superspreaders – she was plunged into controversy. Oster, for her part, says she was just trying to find the kind of data she craves to feel confident in her own decision making. “One of the realizations for me through this process has been: Not everybody finds data as helpful as I do,” she says.

It has been an excruciating year for parents, full of agonizing choices – and that probably won’t change any time soon. But whatever new challenges the coming months bring, acolytes of Oster’s can take comfort in the fact that her advice won’t change, either: Understand the risks, figure out if there is a way to avoid them, weigh them against the benefits, and make a choice you can feel confident in. At the end of the day, she says, “when you make these choices, you kind of need to put the risks in context of other risks, and recognize that by living, you are taking some risks.” **TESSA STUART**

DEJA FOXX

The Gen Z activist and social media maestro is fighting for a pro-choice world

DEJA FOXX WAS unpacking in her dorm room to start her sophomore year at Columbia University when Meena Harris DM’d her about working on her Aunt Kamala’s presidential campaign. “I just started repacking,” Foxx says, laughing. “I wasn’t going to sit in a classroom and talk about Plato and Aristotle when I had skills that could make a difference.”

The youngest staffer on Kamala Harris’ campaign, Foxx, at 19, was already a seasoned activist, driven by her own experience with homelessness and her struggle to access birth control growing up in Tuscon, Arizona. By the time she graduated high school, she had helped launch a teen-led program that provides reproductive-health resources to young people, helmed a successful movement for comprehensive sex-ed classes at her school, and gone viral for confronting then-Sen. Jeff Flake at an Arizona town hall about his stance on Planned Parenthood.

On the Harris campaign, her role as influencer and surrogate strategist didn’t even exist before she arrived. “I got to step in as the expert because there is no one getting a Ph.D. in TikToks and influencer strategy,” she says. Foxx is part of a new generation of activists adept at harnessing the power of social media, blending their personal and professional personas to boost causes they care about. Foxx posts about everything from sponsored vibrator giveaways to videos encouraging women to run for office. “I am a very full, wholly me, authentic person,” she said. “And I think that’s what people resonate with now. . . . Don’t try to fake it. Don’t try to front.”

Foxx is now back in school at Columbia, and also working on GenZ Girl Gang, her online organization promoting sisterhood and community. She makes no secret of her ultimate goal: the presidency, even including it in her email signature, “Activist, Organizer, Badass, Future President.”

Her interests – and ambitions – have expanded from reproductive rights, but fighting for a pro-choice world is still at the heart of her activism. “The world that I work toward is defined and characterized by choice,” she said. “And I don’t just mean the choice of if and when to have children, but the choice to raise those children in communities that are free of gun violence, that are free of police brutality, or family separation. The choice to be able to access healthy foods. . . . I want communities to have all the resources they need to reach their full potential.” **ANDREA MARKS**



IN 1976, Kathy Sullivan was finishing up her Ph.D. in oceanography when an intriguing, if somewhat far-fetched, opportunity presented itself: the chance to become an astronaut. Her expertise was in the geology of the deep-sea floor, a few hundred miles in the exact opposite direction of where a space flight would take her, and joining NASA, she realized, could shut the door forever on her career in oceanography.

"I loved the expeditionary part of oceanography best of all," she says, "being out at sea, adapting to what odd circumstances came your way, bad weather or broken equipment. I adored that." But on a visit home during Christmas break, her brother told her that NASA was recruiting astronauts for its new space-shuttle program. It seemed at first to have nothing to do with the path she was on, but once she read up on it, she realized NASA was looking for people to do in space what she loved doing at sea – planning and executing scientific expeditions. She applied and beat out more than 8,700 other applicants, becoming one of the first six women accepted to NASA's astronaut corps.

Forty-two years and three space-shuttle missions later, including one in which she became the first American woman to do a spacewalk – i.e., float out there in the abyss tethered to the back of a spaceship orbiting at 17,500 miles per hour – she hit another milestone. In oceanography, no less. "As it turned out, the door didn't end up being completely nailed shut," she says. "I've been able to cross back and forth between the space arena and the ocean arena in a lot of wonderful ways."

Last June, Sullivan, 69, became the first woman and only the eighth person overall to submerge 36,000 feet into a part of the Pacific known as the Challenger Deep, making her the only human – male or female – to have been in both outer space and the deepest part of the ocean.

"Dr. Sullivan has been a great explorer her whole life," says Victor Vescovo, the former naval officer and private-equity investor who invited her on the expedition, in which the two of them plunged through the pitch-black ocean – it takes four hours to get to the bottom – in his bespoke 15-foot submersible to take more precise measurements of the depth. (Only 20 percent of the ocean floor has been mapped; we know less about it than we do about the surface of the moon.) "I couldn't think of anyone better," Vescovo says, "to be the first woman to the bottom of Challenger Deep."

Though Sullivan has racked up a hatful of firsts with her adventurous achievements, she was never in it for the headlines or to make the record books. "It's about the things much greater than me that I have been able to be a part of and contribute to," she says. Much of her life's work has been about enabling other scientists' research rather than pursuing her own. On her first space mission, her team launched a satel-



Kathy Sullivan

A scientist whose expeditions in space and at sea have taken her where few others have gone before

By Phoebe Neidl

Photograph by Maddie McGarvey

lite to measure how much energy the sun is adding to the Earth every day, thus gathering years of invaluable data critical for making projections about climate change. In 1990, she was part of the space-shuttle crew that launched the Hubble telescope, which for 30 years has allowed astronomers to peer deeper and deeper into space, finding new galaxies and planets, and to better understand the very origins of the universe.

"I think what it boils down to is I was always just really interested in how things worked," she says. She didn't start off pursuing a job or a title so much as a lifestyle. Growing up in Southern California, she devoured stories about Jacques Cousteau and the Apollo astronauts in *Life* and *Look* magazines. "How could my life be like that?" That was kind of the driving force, which I simplified into: I need to find some kind of work where people buy me airplane tickets," she says. But her ambitions were strictly terrestrial at first. She had a talent for languages and was fluent in

French and German by the time she was done with high school. She was considering a career in the foreign service until she realized as an undergrad that the sciences were a better avenue to the "active, inquisitive life" she wanted to lead.

And while it certainly wasn't the norm for a girl growing up in the 1950s and 1960s to feel like the sky was the limit, in her family, it was. Her father, an aerospace engineer, taught her how to fly a plane as a teenager. "The ethos in our family was very much 'Nobody gets to edit what you're interested in,'" she says. "People around you may voice opinions, but they don't get to choose it for you. That's the peanut gallery. Ignore them."

It was a good ethos to have in her pocket walking into NASA in 1978. In the early days, when she took her seat at meetings, Sullivan remembers, "Every now and then I would realize there was a bit of an odd glance being shot around the room that might have been 'What the hell is that woman doing at the table?'" But as soon as she was introduced as one of the astronauts, "that pretty well settled it." It was the most prestigious title you could have at NASA, and she was accorded the respect it was due. "I mean, I think there were undoubtedly some of the older folks, in particular the older men, that maybe doubted" whether women were up to it, she says.

But any doubts that Kathy Sullivan had the right stuff have long been put to rest. One of her father's favorite family stories, she says, was when he went to mission control and stood in the viewing room to see her spacewalk. He could see the flight surgeon's console, which was monitoring her heartbeat. When she stepped out of the hatch it spiked to 78 for a moment before settling back down to 60 as she worked for three and a half hours in equanimity despite the expanse of the universe being at her back. "I was just ready to go," she says. "I felt completely calm."

After NASA, she used her multidisciplinary talents in a number of administrative roles – most notably as head of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration under President Obama. Perhaps less exhilarating than her expeditionary work, it still satisfied her itch to figure out how things work. "It's just a different kind of jigsaw puzzle," she says. "I take great satisfaction in being able to develop and curry the talents that can take on great challenges and make an organization hum and do great things."

There is, of course, a lot left to explore out there, but Sullivan doesn't have a bucket list of places she is still dying to see. "You'd say, 'Girl, you've been in outer space. You can't possibly have a list like that,'" she says. The sightseeing from the space shuttle would be pretty hard to beat. "I remember looking down at the Earth," she says. "Below me, it's early evening [but] we're still bathed in sunlight, several hundred miles above. It dawned on me, and really sort of stunned me, that there could be some little girl down there pointing up at the sky and saying, 'Look, Mommy, it's a satellite,' and she's pointing at me." ®



MARIELLE HELLER had tried everything. She was nearly a year into her campaign to adapt *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, cartoonist Phoebe Gloeckner's semi-autobiographical graphic novel, into a play, and she was no closer to her goal. At the time, around 2007, Heller had zero writing or directing credits to her name. But she was convinced that Gloeckner's story, about a 15-year-old testing the limits of her sexual desires in 1970s San Francisco, was one that she wanted to tell. So she busted out the nuclear option.

"I just wouldn't take no for an answer," Heller recalls. "I called Phoebe and was like, 'I don't accept it. I don't accept a no. Let me sit down with you. Let me tell you what I want to do. Let me tell you why this means so much to me.' I sent her a million pictures of my cats. I went to Michigan and stayed with her and her kids, and got to know her better."

She's fairly certain it was the cat photos that did it in the end. After 10 months, Gloeckner cracked, and agreed to let Heller adapt *Diary*, first for the stage and eventually for the screen. Heller's frank, funny, gloriously unnerving 2015 film went on to become a critical and festival favorite; it won Best First Feature at the Independent Spirit Awards, and set the ball rolling on a career that's only continued to pick up speed.



MARIELLE HELLER

The uncompromising writer-director-actor has built a career on sticking to her guns

By Jenna Scherer

"At some point I realized: They're saying no to me, but why do I have to accept it?" Heller says. "I have nothing to lose. I can just keep pushing."

Heller, 41, went on to direct 2018's *Can You Ever Forgive Me?*, which starred Melissa McCarthy as literary forger Lee Israel. The next year, she directed *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, about the unlikely friendship between an embittered journalist and Fred Rogers, played by Tom Hanks. Both earned Academy Award nominations. Last year, she helmed the filmed version of Heidi Schreck's Pulitzer- and Tony-contending play, *What the Constitution Means to Me*, and made an unexpected return to her first passion, acting, in Netflix's chess-prodigy story, *The Queen's Gambit*. Her juicy turn as the self-liberating, alcoholic housewife Alma Wheatley was the series' beating heart.

It's mid-January, in the depths of coronavirus winter, and Heller and her family have temporarily decamped from their New York City apartment to "a farmhouse in the middle of nowhere" in Connecticut. Her husband, the Lonely Island's Jorma Taccone, occasionally flits by in the background, stopping to wave hello to the camera. "I have a four-month-old and a six-year-old, and the world is falling apart, so I'm just glad to be here," the writer-director says with an amiable shrug.

Heller has taken an unusual path to becoming one of Hollywood's most sought-after directors. Growing up in Marin County, California, with an art-teacher mother and a chiropractor father, she was drawn to acting at an early age. "I think I was one of those really annoying kids who was so clearly wanting to be a performer," she admits, with a laugh. At the age of eight, she landed a spot in Alameda Children's Musical Theater, shirking her schoolwork to perform in three or four plays a year. "At that time, I just felt like, 'Oh, my God — this is what I was made to do.'" After high school, she studied theater at UCLA, but once she graduated and started auditioning, Heller quickly grew disenchanted, and as she puts it, "betrayed by the business."

"The life of being an actor sucks," she says. "I was in theater school playing Lady Macbeth and doing these great dramatic parts, and then I got out into the real world and was auditioning for commercials, and just not getting to do anything that felt remotely meaningful. I had this vision of these great creative conversations I would have with people and this deep emotional work that we'd all be doing. Then it really was more about whether you were working out enough and in good enough shape to get cast as a character."

Then, when she was 26 years old, her sister gave her a copy of Gloeckner's 2002 book. She fell in love. "It felt so real," Heller remembers. "It crystallized the way I had felt as a teenage girl, and it made me realize I had never felt represented in that way. I was so blown away by the candor in it and how relatable it felt, even though it wasn't my story at all. I was like, 'Oh, this is what boys must have felt when they read *The Catcher in the Rye*.' It just really exploded my world."

After her prolonged tango with Gloeckner, Heller was accepted into Sundance's screenwriting and directing labs, intensive fellowship programs for up-and-coming filmmakers. There, she got to work on the screenplay for *Diary*; she also met many of her future collaborators, among them *Forgive Me* co-writer Nicole Holofcener, *Neighborhood* cinematographer Jody Lee Lipes, and *Queen's Gambit* co-creator Scott Frank.

Heller all but gave up acting for a career behind the camera after *Diary*. But it's her background in the art form that has always informed her work as a director. "I love human beings, and I love their faces," she says. "I just think good actors are the main reason to make movies."

According to the actors she's worked with, her performer's eye shows. "It's an absolute gift to have a director who is also an amazing actor," says McCarthy via email. "There was not a single moment that I didn't feel that we were telling this story together." Hanks agrees. "All directors should have to act; all actors should have to direct," he declares. "If not, a human element is missing from the process. Mari doesn't just respect actors – she relies on them and has faith in an actor's mysterious process. I found her candor and assuredness both liberating and badass."

Hanks is quick to express admiration for Heller's dogged ability to go after exactly what she wants – and reject what she doesn't want. He'd been a fan of the director's work ever since he saw *Diary*, and reached out to her to see if she was interested in collaborating. "I sent her some screenplays, but she did not bite," he says by email. "She literally wrote to me: 'This is the easiest no I've ever said.' Man, that was impressive."

If Heller was unafraid to say no to an icon like Hanks, she was also unafraid to go after an elusive yes. *Neighborhood* writers Micah Fitzerman-Blue and Noah Harpster had approached Hanks about playing Mr. Rogers in the film four times, and he always turned it down. But when Heller was brought on, she said, "Well, let me try." She discussed the role with Hanks at a children's birthday party in his son Colin's backyard, and within a week, he'd signed on. "Everybody was like, 'How did you do that?'" Heller recalls with a grin. "That was great."

Crucially, her approach to the story of *Neighborhood* was to think of Rogers as the antagonist. "Because he required such deep honesty from the people around him and wouldn't settle for anything less, he really pushed people," she says. "He made a good antagonist for that reason."

The focus of the film instead is cranky magazine writer Lloyd Vogel (Matthew Rhys), who's the kind of protagonist the director is always drawn to. Like *Diary*'s Minnie (Bel Powley) and *Forgive Me*'s Lee, Lloyd is both a creative and a complicated man, off-putting and, at first, tricky for an

audience to love. But not for Heller. "All of my characters that I make movies about are characters who've made me feel less alone," she says. "I would never make a movie about somebody who I wasn't sort of in love with."

Heller never planned to return to acting and lose the creative control she'd gained as a writer-director, but then came *The Queen's Gambit* and the character of Alma, the exact type of tricky human being Heller adores. Frank, who had been her adviser at Sundance years before, initially came to her with a smaller role in the series. But a few months before production began, he called to say that the actor playing the co-starring role of protagonist Beth Harmon's (Anya Taylor-Joy) adoptive mother had dropped out, and would Heller be interested in taking it on?

"I was like, 'What? You're crazy. No. I haven't acted in 10 years; nobody's going to let you cast me in this part.' He was like, 'They already said yes,'" she recalls. At first, she turned it down. But her husband urged her to seize the opportunity – as did a past version of herself. "My previous acting self, who I had been keeping buried under my kitchen floor, was banging on the door, being like, 'Are you kidding me? I would have killed for that role, and you're going to say no?'"

It was the first no Heller had given in a long time that turned into a yes, and she doesn't regret it. But she insists that won't become a pattern: "I'm too spoiled. I can't go back to the lifestyle of an actor. I say that with the utmost respect toward actors who are toiling away at it. But there are too many things I want to direct and write. I don't want to be waiting for the phone to ring."

In 2019, Heller started a production company called – what else? – Defiant by Nature. Per its mission statement, it's dedicated to "shining bright lights on women and nonbinary creators." She has a variety of TV projects in the works, including an adaptation of the #MeToo-centered *This American Life* episode "Five Women." She is both pragmatic and hopeful about the future of female-driven stories in Hollywood. "The genie's out of the bottle," she

says. "We're all recognizing a shift in collective consciousness, [with] people finally going, 'Oh, right. We've been living in a world fueled by white supremacy, fueled by the patriarchy, and we can't go backwards.' That doesn't mean there isn't going to be resistance. People are going to fight to keep their privilege and power, because that's what happens when [it] starts to get dismantled."

As we wrap up, Heller has something to dismantle herself: the myth of getting discovered in Hollywood. "A lot of us tend to think someone's going to give us a big break, and I've never seen it. Big breaks don't really exist," she says. "The thing that I tell people is, 'Nobody's going to do it for you – it has to come from you.'" ®

JULIA GARNER

In a world where young stars are shouting for attention, the *Ozark* actress says it all with a glance

By Amy Nicholson

LAST MARCH, Julia Garner shot an all-day subway scene with 400 extras in New York for the upcoming Netflix series *Inventing Anna*. By the time she took off her wig, she heard production had shut down due to the pandemic. So, she flew home, fell asleep for a month, found two suitcases she hadn't unpacked since 2018, and for the first time in four years, spent some extended time in her own skin. Which, as pale and platinum-curved and recognizable as that skin is, couldn't be more different from the characters who've made her famous – especially *Ozark*'s Ruth Langmore, a money-laundering moppet who exhales expletives, assassinates her uncles, and marches through the casino boats of central Missouri in cheap, ruffled blouses that she wears like football pads. As LeBron James once tweeted, "She's a gangsta!"

In person – or rather, on Zoom from Atlanta, where she's currently shooting *Ozark*'s fourth and final season – Garner is cheerful, even-keeled, and cautious. Nothing like Ruth, who hits first and apologizes (almost) never. At 27, a decade after landing a small, but pivotal part in the Sundance-winning drama *Martha Marcy May Marlene*, Garner savors being too dull to be stalked by paparazzi. She declares herself boring as though waving a white flag that probably doubles as a cozy blanket. Her goal isn't fame, it's respect, which can be measured on a scale from appreciative nods on the sidewalk to two consecutive Emmys for Outstanding Supporting Actress.

In the Nation State of Boring, i.e., the Hollywood Hills home she shares with her husband, the musician Mark Foster, and their bulldog, Biz, Garner hibernates and recharges between roles.

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ/TRUNK ARCHIVE



But onscreen she's electric, commanding attention despite her tendency to pick characters who listen more than speak. "All of them have a really strong inner voice," says Garner.

Her body language fills the silence. Where other stars crank up the charm for the camera, Garner creeps into frame like a doe sniffing the wind. A Garner character is underestimated and kicked around, and senses that something imperceptible is terribly wrong. Perhaps her adopted family is a cult (as in her breakout role), or her mother's aggressively charming new husband will come at her with a knife (*Dirty John*), or her much older boyfriend is a KGB agent trolling for intel on her CIA-honcho dad (*The Americans*). Maybe she just needs to get cash from her grandmother for an abortion before anybody finds out she's pregnant (*Grandma*). Her girls aren't big-sky dreamers. They're ant-farm tunnelers, young women hemmed in by family or fate who grimly make the best of their middling options.

Take Garner's latest film, *The Assistant*, in which she plays Jane, the browbeaten underling of a Harvey Weinstein-esque mogul, whose daily routine consists of organizing his box-office reports, unpacking his syringes of erectile dysfunction medicine, and parrying calls from his wife. Jane reacts to her boss's invective, and his flattery, with honed neutrality. But study Garner's face – that naturally downturned mouth – and you can see Jane's motors whirring. Director Kitty Green told her "that she wanted it to be a quiet film," Garner says, "but the subject is very loud."

Green intended to shoot *The Assistant* entirely in wide shots, but after the first day of filming, she scrapped that plan. "We saw how amazing Julia's face was on the camera," says Green. "Every little look, every gesture, the way she moves, just how expressive she was, was incredible and needed to be up close."

Garner read the script for *The Assistant* two months after Weinstein's overdue expulsion from Hollywood. Before then, it probably couldn't have gotten made. "I mean, it was already a challenge to get made," Garner says. And that's without her character even saying the word "rape." The film is so restrained that Green wrote Jane without an overt personality – an everywoman whose only glint of individuality is a fondness for tacky coffee mugs. Garner's "inner world is what makes the whole thing work," says Green. "She is the film. The film does not exist without her. The entire film is written on her face."

When Jane takes her suspicions to a craven HR supervisor, played by *Succession*'s Matthew Macfadyen, she can't bring herself to spell out the sexual assaults taking place 20 feet from her desk. Instead, she raises an eyebrow. He doesn't get it, or he pretends not to, and for 12 script pages, he cows Jane with counter accusations and threats. The scene is oppressive and static, and at its most agonizing point, Jane lets slip one single tear. Garner did take after take, and every time, there came that tear. Green calls it "genius."

Ironically, Garner has spent most of her life outrunning a childhood fear that she was, in fact, embarrassingly dumb. Due to a severe learning disability, she couldn't read until she was 10 years old. Doctors thought she might have a neurological problem. Adrift in the classroom, she struggled to keep pace with the other kids by deciphering their social cues and facial expressions. "I almost had to learn how to act even from that age, act like I knew and I could understand what everybody was talking about," says Garner. "My whole life in a weird way was prepping me to do what I'm doing now." To this day, she's a great mimic. (Google her Britney Spears impression on *The Tonight Show*.)

Luckily, her family was loving, patient, and creative. Garner grew up in an expressive Jewish household in the Bronx. Her father, Thomas, is a painter and art teacher. Her mother, Tamar Gingold, is a former Israeli sketch comic turned therapist who transformed their living room into an improv stage. When telemarketers called, Tamar would put the phone on speaker and pretend to be the family's harried Russian babysitter. Everyone leapt into action. Julia was tasked to play a squeaky-voiced brat, or on occasion, a loose bird. "The guy would be like, 'OK, I'll call back,' and he would never call back," Garner says with a laugh. "Telemarketers stopped calling our house phone."

At school, however, Garner's literacy struggles had made her painfully self-conscious. Her parents noted their daughter's love of classic movies – Fellini, Wilder, Scorsese, they showed her all the heavyweights – and figured an acting class would teach her confidence. At 14, Garner enrolled at the T. Schreiber Studio in New York. At 15, she began to audition for regular-kid roles. A casting director at Nickelodeon tutted, "Honey, you're great. But you shouldn't be here."

They were right. By 16, Garner was on the red carpet in Park City for *Martha Marcy May Marlene*, fielding questions about playing the youngest victim of John Hawkes' cult leader. That's an extreme cure for shyness. Garner shrugs: "Sometimes you need to be pushed into the deep end."

Not long after the film's premiere, Garner, by then 17, flew to Los Angeles, shook a few hands, and got a not-so-subtle hint that she needed to straighten her hair and get veneers. "I quickly saw I'm not going to get those girl-next-door-type roles," says Garner. She fled back to New York and rededicated herself to independent films. So what if she was too odd to prance around as some teen hero's flat-ironed girlfriend? Better to be a bold choice by a director willing to, say, cast a Jewish girl from the Bronx to play a fundamentalist Utah Mormon, her first starring role, in the 2012 festival film *Electrick Children*.

Garner does her homework. To truly understand the inner workings of a Mormon teen, or *Ozark*'s Ruth Langmore, she writes a diary from

their point of view and tries to pinpoint what shaped them as a kid. Her mother has given her stacks of psychology books that Garner calls "super beneficial in terms of acting." She describes her characters as real people she's been fortunate enough to meet.

"I feel like, when a child goes through something, the first heartbreak, they lose their innocence, and they're stuck at that age," says Garner. "To me, trauma is trauma. With Ruth, her main

thing is she doesn't have women. She only knows how to be with men. But she's not with men who respect women, or they're not good men." That explains Ruth's complicated relationship with Marty Byrde, played by Jason Bateman, the first adult man in her life to appreciate her intelligence. "Ruth doesn't know what a normal and healthy relationship is," Garner says. "She doesn't know what unconditional love is." It's certainly

not what she has with Marty, who feigns that Ruth is his daughter of sorts while keeping her at arm's length. Some of the show's most wrenching moments are when Ruth reaches the limits of Marty's loyalty and finds herself, once again, with no one to lean on besides her own backbone.

"She just so easily communicates vulnerability as well as strength," Bateman says of Garner. "That's a real testament to her talent, that she can pull off both ends of that spectrum."

Now, after scoring two Emmys for the role, Garner fields calls from people who "four years ago wanted me to fix everything about me." She's not holding a grudge. But she's now inked her own production deal, so that, like Ruth, she can take care of herself. "She's got really good taste and a really good ear and a really good eye," says Bateman. He could see her stretch into character-driven comedies, perhaps something by David O. Russell or Christopher Guest. "I'd like to see her put her hand up for some of that work, because I think she'd be fantastic."

Garner is ready to get a tad more playful. Next up, she's starring as Anna Delvey, the infamous scammer socialite who bilked a subset of Manhattan's elite out of hundreds of thousands of dollars, in Shonda Rhimes' *Inventing Anna*. Garner visited Delvey – real name Anna Sorokina – in prison, where she's serving a four-to-12-year sentence for larceny, to solve the riddle of a working-class Russian girl who repackaged herself as a billionaire German heiress. But she found someone secretive and vague. "Anna doesn't even know herself, and it's really hard to play someone who doesn't know themselves," Garner says. "My roles just get harder and harder the older I get."

"I always say, 'Maybe this will be easier,'" she continues, reflecting on the career she's building. But does she *really* want that? "No," she says, laughing. "If I hear that a part's going to be hard, I'm like, 'That sounds terrifying, that sounds terrible.' And then I'm like, 'I'm doing it.'" 📺



SARAH MCBRIDE

How a 30-year-old activist and history buff became a Delaware state senator — and the highest-ranking trans official in the country

By Hannah Murphy

Photograph by
Morgan Levy



IT'S EARLY January, and Sarah McBride is sitting at a desk in her parents' house in Delaware. A SARAH MCBRIDE FOR STATE SENATE yard sign is wedged between a bookshelf and the wall — already a relic from the election she won two months earlier. "It's been a whirlwind," she says, leaning forward and taking off her glasses to rub her eyes. And not just because it's her first time holding public office: When she won her election for state senator of Delaware's 1st District with an overwhelming 73 percent of the vote, she became the highest-ranking openly trans elected official in U.S. history.

Even on a video call, it's easy to imagine how she captured three-quarters of her constituents in November. At 30 years old, she's already well into her second decade in politics. She was 13 when she tagged along on a campaign for the first time, for a friend of her dad's who was running for Delaware insurance commissioner. At 17, she worked on Democrat Jack Markell's bid to be governor, recruiting about 50 high school volunteers that Markell credits, in part, for his upset win. McBride became a fixture at his public appearances, introducing him at events and, after he was elected, helping write his speeches when he was stuck. "She's got this really remarkable ability to deliver hard truths in a way that doesn't turn people off," Markell says, "even if they're things that people would rather not hear."

An early test of that skill came on Christmas in 2011, the day she came out to her progressive, well-meaning parents. At the time, trans

identities were still hovering outside of the American mainstream; figures like Laverne Cox and Caitlyn Jenner had yet to break through into pop culture. Her parents begged her not to transition — a reaction that was based in fear for her future, but that was deeply painful for McBride. She grasped for the metaphor that would help them understand, and finally found a way to describe her gender dysphoria that broke through: "a constant feeling of homesickness." Her parents have been supportive ever since.

A few months later, as the student-body president of American University, she came out as trans in her school newspaper. It was a huge and affirming step — celebrated by the student body and the media. But her dream was always to be in politics, and with so few examples of openly trans politicians, she wrote in her 2018 book, *Tomorrow Will Be Different*, "I worried that my dreams and my identity were mutually exclusive."

She's built her career out of proving that wrong. In 2012, she became the first openly trans woman to work in the White House, when she interned for Obama, and dedicated the next seven years to becoming one of the nation's leading LGBTQ advocates, including as the spokeswoman for the Human Rights Campaign, the largest LGBTQ organization in the country. In 2016, she became the first out trans person to speak at a Democratic National Convention.

One of the rhetorical challenges in her campaign for state senator was communicating to her future constituents that she could be *their* advocate, not just an advocate for trans rights. "The sad reality is that the moment I say the word 'transgender,' even if 99 percent of what I'm saying has nothing to do with it, some people will presume that I'm running to work solely on transgender rights," she says.

But once again, she found a way to break through. "I talked about how the fight for equality isn't about some abstract moral principle," says McBride, who's a passionate American-history buff. In her speeches, she connects the fight for

LGBTQ rights to progressive values and the larger American experiment — "the need of every person to have a job that pays the bills, housing that keeps them safe, health care that meets their needs, education that prepares them for the future, and communities where they're treated with dignity."

"She understands how to find universal truths in her own stories," says Markell. "It was always one of her great strengths — something we look for in great political leaders."

"I'm in the business of social change," McBride says. "And to drive social change, you've got to start by meeting people where they are, with language that resonates with them." ®

"I'm in the business of social change. To drive social change, you've got to meet people where they are, with language that resonates with them."

Icons & Influences

They broke through old barriers, blazed paths of their own, and made new worlds possible. Eleven of today's top acts on the women who have inspired them most

Joni Mitchell

By Haim

T

HE THREE SISTERS who make up Haim – Este, 35, Danielle, 33, and Alana, 29 – grew up on Joni Mitchell's music, listening to her songs from the time they were kids in California's San Fernando Valley. Mitchell has gone on to serve as a key inspiration for their own music (as heard most clearly on their 2020 homage "Man From the Magazine") and their fearless approach to creativity.

DANIELLE HAIM *Miles of Aisles* was the Joni Mitchell album that started our love affair, and it's the one that I always go back to. It's her live album from 1974. There's a little bit of everything, songs from all her albums up until then, and she's playing them with the L.A. Express, which was this amazing jazz band, backing her. That's such a great canvas for her music.

ESTE HAIM She was getting more into jazz in the Seventies, so the record is a reimagining of a lot of her early work through this jazz lens. Of course, when we first heard it, we weren't thinking about any of that. We had gone with our mom to this record store in the Valley called Second Bin, which, unfortunately, I don't think is around anymore.

ALANA HAIM I was around six. That was pretty much the only CD that was in our mom's car – I don't think she knew how to change the CD, so every time she turned on the car, that's what would play. And because I





“

Every year her songs take on new meanings. That's the beauty of Joni.

”

◆ JONI MITCHELL

was so young, and because my mom knew all the songs and would sing every word, I thought my mom *was* Joni Mitchell at one point. She knew every single run and every single melody on that record. It was the most inspiring thing.

ESTE Our mom played guitar and was not shy about singing, and thankfully, she has a really good voice. We saw our mom and how much she loved Joni, and that made us inherently love Joni that much more.

DANIELLE Around high school, when our friends were going through their first heartbreaks, I would see their moms be like, “Here, listen to *Blue*.” “A Case of You,” “River” – those songs were a lot of my friends’ first foray into Joni’s music.

ALANA We got the gift of listening to her at such a young age, but as a six-year-old listening to *Miles of Aisles*, you don’t really understand what the lyrics mean. And then we kind of grew up with her. Every year her songs take on new meanings, and I think that’s the beauty of Joni – discovering new things in her music. I could listen to a song like “A Case of You” when I was in my early twenties, and that song has taken on a whole new meaning now that I’m almost 30.

DANIELLE Her views of rhythm have always been in our blood. I remember seeing an interview where she said she was trying to step away from trying to cram a bunch of words into a phrase – but that’s something about her songwriting that I love, because it’s so percussive and rhythmic.

ALANA I relistened to *Miles of Aisles* just to get back into the zone recently, and that version of “Carey” brought me to a different place. The actual studio recording is incredible, but the version on *Miles of Aisles* is even more so.

DANIELLE My favorite album of hers might be *Hejira*. I’ve been on a “Coyote” kick for two years, but “Amelia” is my favorite now.

ESTE “People’s Parties” and “All I Want” were our favorite Joni songs in high school.

DANIELLE “People’s Parties” encapsulated what our social life was like, because our dad was strict. He wouldn’t let us go out that much, so I would be in my room listening to “People’s Parties,” dreaming that I was at some faraway party on a bender. 🍷



Fiona Apple By Waxahatchee

I GREW UP taking dance classes, and I had this cool dance teacher who would play good music, and music that I wasn’t superfamiliar with. So the first time I heard Fiona was right around *When the Pawn...* came out. We did a dance to the song “Paper Bag,” and I remember immediately being like, “I’ve never heard anything like this.” Even as a kid, I just immediately clocked it. I was like, “This person, Fiona Apple, is really interesting.” This is before I was a songwriter at all, before I had much of my own taste. That was the beginning of my fandom, and it’s gone all the way through her career.

What I think is so cool about her is, there’s this trope or this stereotype of women’s emotions – the idea of the hysterical woman – and that has been weaponized against women forever, from the beginning of time. What’s so special about Fiona Apple is that she takes that idea and she turns it into this superpower. She’s so smart and so poetic, and she takes this thing that had been used as a negative against women and just flips it completely on its head and makes it powerful and very relatable. I hear her make these really profound statements

in her songs, and I have this vision of millions of women across the world hearing that and feeling so empowered.

It was so cool and triumphant to watch her have such an amazing year in 2020, and be so recognized as the greatest of all time when she made *Fetch the Bolt Cutters*. I enjoy that, as a fan of hers – watching her not be overlooked, watching people put her on the pedestal that I think she deserves to be on. She has a long-standing career where she’s chipped away and chipped away and gotten closer and closer and closer to whatever her truth is. I think her next record will probably be her best record yet, and that’ll keep happening. So that’s super-inspiring to me. That’s the kind of career I want to have.

I appreciate what she does as a songwriter even more now that I do the same thing. I appreciate how good she is at it. Especially on my last album, I was really, really paying attention to her lyrics. She is such a poet, such an incredible, detail-oriented writer in a way that is singular. When I was in the studio, I had a picture of her on the board – Fiona, SZA, and Lucinda Williams were my three patron saints for that album. And then when I heard she had a new record coming in 2020, I was like, “Thank God.” I think that her history is still being written. I really look up to that. 🍷

PREVIOUS SPREAD: JACK ROBINSON/GETTY IMAGES. THIS SPREAD: FROM LEFT: BEATRICE DE GEAY/“THE NEW YORK TIMES”/REDUX; MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES; MARK SELIGER

Candi Staton

By Angel Olsen

I MOVED TO Chicago from St. Louis in my early twenties. The winters were really tough, and I'd have to get up at 5 a.m. to open the cafe where I worked. Candi's music was something I would turn to every day on my way to work. It's hard to find anyone who compares to the way she yell-sings. You can hear her background in choir singing: There's a need to be redeemed, whether it's from God or a partner. She sounds like she's stuck in a trauma cycle because she loves someone so much, but they're bad for her. I really love her song "Sweet Feeling"; it's upbeat and exciting, but it's a sad song. It's weird to me that not that many people have heard of Candi, because she's incredible. Any time I introduce her music to anyone – specifically to [1970's *I'm Just a Prisoner*] – they're like, "The whole record is amazing." Every song on it is just perfect. ®



Rihanna

By Karol G



W

ITH SO MANY WOMEN, I'll like how one dresses, I'll like how one expresses herself, I'll like the performance style of another. But with Rihanna, I admire every aspect – as a woman, as a businessperson, as a singer, where she comes from, representing Barbados, where she's gotten with her talent. We've heard her do the richest, clubbiest music and the most melancholy sounds, songs that are extremely profound, peak collaborations, historic feats. In this industry, it's really easy to lose yourself. I see her standing by her style and what she likes. She inspires you to feel great without worrying about what people around you say.

The first song of hers that made me go "Who is she, and where did she come from?" was "Pon de Replay." Later, she released songs like "Umbrella," and that's when I started to feel inspired. I read interviews she did explaining her culture and roots, and I felt like, "OK, I come from Medellín, Colombia – maybe I can do it, too." When you say, "What does Rihanna sing?" You can't say, "Oh, she does pop." She's a singer making music for everyone. She's involved in racial justice, in the LGBTQ community, in how women should love themselves however they are. In her video for "Stay," you see her in that bathtub, and I swear I can feel the vibe she's emoting. She makes you live through it so personally. I sometimes see artists who are carefully produced – and that's valid – but what I see in Rihanna that hits me so deep is her naturalness. Everything she does really represents her. ®



Nina Simone

By Brittany Howard

Björk

By Ellie Goulding

WHEN I was 15 years old, I came home drunk to my parents' house to find Björk performing on TV. She was at Royal Albert Hall, and I think she was singing "Hyperballad." I'd only ever heard "It's Oh So Quiet," and I didn't know anything else about her. I came home and was just mesmerized by the television. I just wanted to know everything about her. I wanted to get my hands on every single song, every album she had released.

The more I learned about Björk, the more I felt an affinity with her because of the way she was so connected to the place where she grew up – to nature, to fields and mountains and elements. I had just started to write at the time, and I was told so often that I had an unusual voice. People would joke and say it was too weird to be a voice. She made me realize that I could be whatever I wanted to be, regardless of how unusual my voice was.

I had a fascination with classical music at the time – I played clarinet for a long time until I got bored with it, and then I picked up a guitar. I also grew up on electronic music and techno from my mom. It felt like Björk was an artist with a similar instinct, with her moving to London and immersing herself in dance music and falling in love with it. She managed to fuse it all so effortlessly. 

T

HE THING I relate to most about Nina is her sensitivity, her ability to be incredibly powerful, and to also be incredibly vulnerable. She knew her worth. She fought for the rights to her music, and she fought for her royalties that were indeed owed to her. People cast her to the side, like she was this crazy, angry black woman. But those were *her* songs. Those are *her* performances. She deserved exactly what she was after.

That's something I hang on to: You have to watch your own back in this industry. She wanted love, connection, to feel her worth. She wanted to be heard. She wanted justice. She wanted to talk about the things that no one wanted to talk about in music.

I don't know if I will ever fully understand her. One way she's been an inspiration to me is not buying into the need to be commercially successful. I think she had a lot of anger from being blocked out of that, but in the end it didn't matter. What we took away from that is that she was doing things her way. She was being herself, no matter how complicated or disastrous, or how bad that could look at times. That was her.

The first Nina Simone song I ever heard was probably "Feeling Good." I remember being younger and loving the quality of her voice. It always was something that I sat back and actually listened to and was present for. I didn't grow up having access to records or vinyl or CDs, so every time I discov-

ered something new of hers, it was just by being out in the world.

As YouTube developed, I got to learn a whole lot more about her catalog, and I learned more about her. There's footage of her performing "Stars" at the Montreux Jazz Festival in 1976. It's a Janis Ian song, and she and Janis were really good friends. The way Nina sang that was so incredibly visceral and true and real, like she was singing about her life, even though she didn't write the words. "Backlash Blues" and "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free," from that performance at Montreux in 1976, just give me chills.

When she comes out on the stage [at that Montreux Jazz Festival performance], it's pretty clear that she did not want to be there. I don't know what was going on behind the scenes, obviously, but she walks out and she's in one mood and she's riffing. She's changing lyrics. She's transforming the music that I thought I knew into something that is much more personal. You can see her go through

all these emotions of sadness, of rage, of joy, of power. It's coming out of her eyes. You see her entire self change. By the time you get to the end of the performance, she's dancing. It's incredible, and it's something real that people can still watch.

Performing is performing, but I think she did something more than performing. And that's something that I want to do. It's about more than cash. It's more than being able to get into places because of your name or awards or accolades. I get to perform, I get to be accepted in the way

that I really and truly am. It's inspirational.

She was all those things. She was rageful, and she was vengeful, and she was problematic. She was all of these things – but she was a human being. In our culture especially, we want our superstars to be perfect. She's a superstar, an icon, that is anything but perfect. 

“
She wanted love,
connection, to
feel her worth.
She wanted to
be heard. She
wanted justice.
”





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THE FIRST TIME I heard of Betty Davis was in college. I was in a class that was about Miles Davis, and we were reading his autobiography. I got to the page where he was describing meeting her, and how she influenced his fashion and his art. She styled him, and she introduced him to Jimi Hendrix, and that changed his trajectory to go toward more psychedelic rock.

When I listened to her music, I was instantly struck by the quality of her voice. She makes me want to listen to what she's saying. Listening to her records, it's this raw emotion that makes you believe what she's saying. That's a really good lesson as an artist. I can get caught up in "Oh, did I hit the note?" to the point where I forget "Why did I even write the song? What am I feeling while I'm saying these words that I wrote?" She's transmuting energy through her voice, which is really powerful.

She talked about love and sex in a way that felt like you were hearing from an auntie or sister. It felt very intimate and very specific. Her subject matter and her image were ahead of her time. [In the documentary *They Say I'm*

Different] she would say, "I just talk aggressively and I know what I want, and men don't like that. They like for women to be submissive." She wouldn't compromise on that.

When I was working on my album *Legacy!* *Legacy!*, I became obsessed with interviews by black artists. There was one recorded interview with Betty Davis that I listened to, and this one was intriguing to me because she would sometimes just answer "no." It seemed like there was a human boundary that she wasn't willing to cross for the sake of press. As I've become an artist who has to navigate those things, I always think back to that. You can have your own protected space of things that are just for you.

Today, we can see and hear the influence of Betty Davis in so many places. One thing I think about is the way that she sat across the intersection of a bunch of genres – funk, soul, rock. That makes me think of a lot of artists today. She owned her own sexuality and expressed that onstage and wasn't afraid to sing about that. That makes me think of so many black women artists in hip-hop, R&B, and soul who are comfortable with expressing that part of themselves, whether it's Cardi B, Megan Thee Stallion, SZA, Ari Lennox. It's not about allowing it to be commodified, but more just saying, "This is a part of my authentic expression." She really laid the groundwork for that. [®]

Betty Davis

By Jamila Woods

Beyoncé

By Chloe
x Halle



“

She has taught us that you don't have to dim your light. Shine. Be yourself. Be free with it.

”

B

EYONCÉ IS the true definition of what it is to be yourself and work hard and give it your all. As young artists and as young black women who watch her, you automatically know your worth. You know to stand in your power, because you're like, “Wow, look at this other black woman killing it. All she had

to do was be herself. Let me try to do that.”

She understands what it means to be an artist, so when it's us creating, it's purely our own ideas, our own lyrics and melodies. [*Chloe x Halle are signed to Beyoncé's label, Parkwood Entertainment.*] We have total creative freedom. She lets us spread our wings, experiment, do what we want. Of course, we love and appreciate her notes. When we sent our last album, *Ungodly Hour*, to her, she barely had any notes – which is rare, because she's a Virgo queen. We were just floored and so happy.

It's a hard, hard journey to be in front of everyone. One little thing that you do can be overanalyzed by everyone. You have to be strong and not let that get to you. Watching Beyoncé rise above all of the madness and just be her talent is so inspiring. She has taught us that it's OK to be yourself, wholeheartedly. You don't have to dim your light. Shine. Be yourself. Be free with it. Because she has done that, she has made us believe that we could do that. ®



I

WAS INTRODUCED TO Carly Simon through my parents, more specifically through my mom. She was like, “Oh, yeah, you’re superlate on this,” and I was like, “I know! Please enlighten me.” For a long time, I only really knew Carly for “You’re So Vain.” But once I heard “Nobody Does It Better,” it set off everything. Part of me couldn’t believe that those songs were the same person, because they’re just such different moods.

My mom is a very spiritual person. When she was in college, Carly Simon’s music acted as this safe space for her and her friends to hang out in. Every time she went back to Carly, it was this understanding place, where she could have her guard down and feel understood. That’s what I get from Carly’s music, too, and that’s something that I strive to have in my own music.

The biggest thing that I connect to is her lyrics. I specifically remember where I was when I heard “That’s the Way I’ve Always Heard It Should Be” for the first time. It was around the beginning of 2020, and I was alone on my porch. I listened to it and just felt like I hadn’t heard something that cut so deep within me, ever.

It was one of the songs that was the catalyst for my [upcoming] second album – whether it was watching her play the piano and how effective that was and how much I want to bring that to my own shows, or how honest she is in her music and how she’s not afraid to voice fears that she has for the future. Everything that she was saying felt like exactly the thoughts that I was too scared to let myself think about marriage and relationships and the future. At 22, it’s a strange age to be thinking about that. You could be so far away from ever experiencing that, but it could be closer than you think as well.

Through everything that she went through with such a public relationship, I think she handled it with grace. She has always just been, like, “I have nothing to hide. Here’s everything about me, take it or leave it.” That’s something that shows strength more than anything else. She’s always been that way. There’s nothing you could add or take away from her legacy, because she’s always been truthful. I think ebbs and flows in someone’s life are much more normal than we think, and especially with someone as famous as Carly, I feel like it’s hard to look at people with such legacies and not think that their life is perfect. The fact that she was always so upfront about everything that wasn’t perfect, I think, is what makes her the most important to me. ®

Carly Simon

By Clairó

T

HE INDIGO GIRLS were so deeply influential in my life – not just musically, but as an activist and as an out queer

person. The representation and the visibility that they managed to scrape together, despite all odds and all the obstacles against them, were really important in my life. I needed them.

I was about 13 or 14 years old, and I had come home from a friend's house – it was a girl who I had a total crush on – and I was very confused about it. I got home, and my parents had rented the movie *Philadelphia* on VHS. I snuck it into my bedroom, popped the movie into my VCR. It was so poignant to me that I felt this pull in my stomach. In retrospect, I was being galvanized toward something that I was only just beginning to understand about myself.

In the film, I heard these women singing this song: “I don’t wanna talk about it, how you broke my heart...” I asked for the soundtrack for Christmas, and I got it, and that’s when I really heard the Indigo Girls. I was already a musician – I was obsessed with Elton John, and I had been singing since I was eight. But the Indigo Girls were a fork in the road for me, and because of them, I went in a different direction. One of my friends at school owned *Swamp Ophelia*, and it was backwards from there:



Indigo Girls

By Brandi Carlile

“

I don’t ever write a lyric that I wouldn’t feel comfortable sending to Emily Saliers.

”

Nomads Indians Saints, Rites of Passage, Strange Fire, Indigo Girls.

I met the Indigo Girls when I was about 17. I had a friend drive me to Portland [Oregon] in the pouring rain, because I had won a contest to meet them before a radio show. I took my first guitar with me, which was this shitty

little beat-up Ovation knockoff called an Applause. I met them, and they signed it. And I remember leaving so unsatisfied. I was like, “I have this signature, but I need to be friends with them. I need to get good enough to where they’re going to hear my music.” The very first thing I did, once I gained any notoriety at all, was find a way to reach out to them.

When I opened for the Indigo Girls on tour, I saw that they haven’t just gone to major markets and played Chicago, New York, Boston, San Francisco. They’ve gone to Door County and Fish Creek, Wisconsin. They take their music to the people, and the fans had an affection for them that was different than for other artists. I knew at that point that I wanted that relationship. I’m just like their other fans – I never would have missed a show, and there’s not a deep album cut I don’t know.

We’re very close – we have a family relationship now. They know all about my origins as a little baby lesbian who was obsessed with the Indigo Girls. I don’t ever write a lyric I wouldn’t feel comfortable sending to Emily Saliers. That’s a standard I’ve set. And I love that they’re moms now. They’re such punk rockers, and they have this incredible tenacity, and the fact that we now sit around and give each other mom tips is the coolest. It’s the full-circle queer experience coming to a place that just makes me really proud to be their friend. ®



Sheryl Crow

By Maren Morris

F

RIEND, SISTER, HIGHWOMAN: Sheryl Crow is what you want your hero to be, which is nothing that will shatter your illusions of them. I can count on one hand the people that have been that for me. Dolly Parton is one of them. Sheryl Crow is the other. There’s really no one quite like her. She’s genre-less. That’s something that I try to hold true to myself: not worrying about the label attached, just putting songs out that you love. I still cry when I hear “Strong Enough.” It resonates with me so much, even though I’m happily married.

She called me five or six years ago. My song “My Church” had just come out. I was at a bar after a write, and I was like, “Hold on, guys, I have a voicemail.” The bottom dropped out of the room. It was Sheryl Crow, saying that she saw a lot of herself in that song. For years, she’s always shown up for me, and I’ve shown up for her. There are some artists I’ve collaborated with and it’s like you’re walking on eggshells. You are trying to be respectful, but you don’t feel quite comfortable. But with Sheryl, not once have I ever felt like that. I will love her always. ®

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JULIEN BAKER'S HARD TRUTH

One of the best young singer-songwriters in indie rock starts thinking big

By ANGIE MARTOCCIO



Julien Baker

Little Oblivions

MATADOR

★★★★☆

I CAN SEE MYSELF inside your bloodshot eyes,” Julien Baker sings on her excellent third record. “Wondering if you can see yourself in mine.” It’s a moment of raw, bleary intimacy that gets to the heart of this 25-year-old Tennessean’s potent appeal. On two standout solo albums, and as a member of the indie supergroup Boygenius, with Phoebe Bridgers and Lucy Dacus, she’s established herself as one of the leading female singer-songwriters of her generation, both for her music’s muted grandeur and lyrics that seem to dive headlong into emotional chaos.

In 2019, Baker took a break from music to finish her undergraduate degree. But she’s emerged a much more proficient artist. After →

ILLUSTRATION BY
Bijou Karman



➔ JULIEN BAKER

making her previous LPs mostly on guitar and piano, Baker recorded her latest, which she also produced, with a full band, creating a big, steely, momentous-feeling sound that's much more pop-aware than anything she's done.

The expansive music does nothing to dilute her lyrical directness. "Knocked out on a weekend/Would you hit me this hard if I were a boy?" she asks on the opener, "Hardline," against waves of storm-born guitars. "See, I don't need you to defend me/'Cause it's just the sort of thing that I enjoy." She concludes the track with a question that persists through each song that follows: "You say it's not so cut and dry, it isn't black and white/What if it's all black, baby, all the time?"

Baker takes us through bars, parties, and cab rides as she navigates a winding path home, one painful night after another. Sobriety chips are abandoned on dressers, and blood results in scars. Drums weave in and out as she drops ominous lines that linger long after their arrival. "I was on a long spiral down," she confesses on "Heatwave." "But before I make it to the ground/I'll wrap Orion's belt around my neck and kick the chair out." As a songwriter, Baker seems to draw power from such darkness – like she's walking out of a house that's in flames, completely unscathed. Her resilience is her battle armor, and she wears it well.

Little Oblivions isn't all blood and guts on the barroom floor. The record has its delicate, quieter moments, too, though they're hardly any less visceral and intense. "I wish that I drank because of you and not only because of me," she sings over subtle piano on the heartbreaking "Song in E." "Then I could blame something painful enough not to make me look any more weak." Her Boygenius bandmates guest on "Favor," their backing vocals giving the somber words even more weight. "Who put me in your way to find/And what right had you not to let me die?"

What results is a fully realized artistic statement without a skippable track, even if a few songs trail off a bit toward the end – almost as if Baker knows the rush of cathartic energy has left everyone involved a little exhausted, including herself. And that's just fine, because this is enough reality for a lifetime, let alone one record. **R**



Nathan, Caleb, Matthew, and Jared Followill (from left) of Kings of Leon

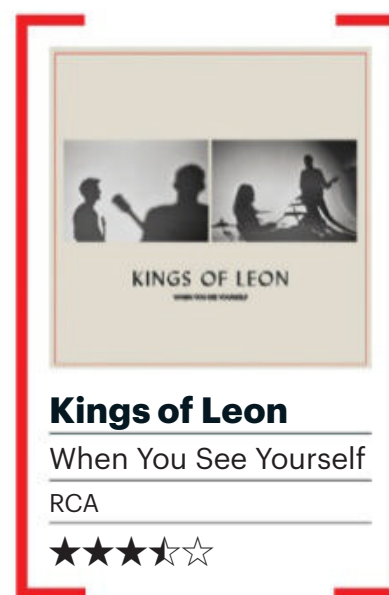
KINGS OF LEON'S NEW NORMAL

The Southern garage rockers' eighth album pursues an arena rock of the mind By JON DOLAN

KINGS OF LEON front-man Caleb Followill is an arena-rock idealist, a firm believer in the undying power of setting up shop at the 50 yard line of rock & roll expectations and doing very brisk business. "Like in a mainstream melody/ Oh, I want to take you in!" he told us on the Kings' last album, 2016's *Walls*, a subtle come-on that was a pretty fair assessment of why his band's music hit home with millions.

So, what do these Tennessee titans do in times like these, when there aren't any arenas to be rocked? In some ways, the band's eighth album is an arena rock of the mind, tempering the strapping anthemics of hits like "Sex on Fire" and "Use Somebody" for songs that stretch out en route to arriving at a serene kind of swagger.

Followill, brothers Nathan and Jared, and cousin Matthew are still as sexily *en fuego* as ever. The lead single, "Ban-



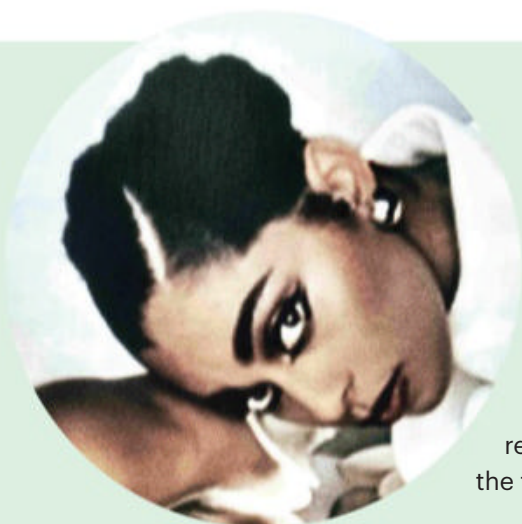
dit," lunges and soars with rippling guitar leads cascading across some of the dirtiest riffs the band has put on a record since the New South-meets-neo-Strokes garage moves of its first two albums, *Youth & Young Manhood* and *Aha Shake Heartbreak*, in the early 2000s. "Golden Restless Age" is low-slung and sleek, piling on slashing, intersecting guitars before lifting off into a golden restless chorus.

And the crosscutting punk riffs on "Echoing" are downright violent.

But if you're looking for the woo-woo payoffs the Kings do so well, this record might surprise you. Even at their most sweeping, these songs brood and meander a bit, often in interesting directions. Album opener "When You See Yourself, Are You Far Away" is all tension and no release, its gorgeous guitar arpeggios and martial groove leading to the epiphany "The pleasures of this life I'm told, will spit you out in the middle of the road." On "100,000 People," Followill sings about love as a defense against today's bleakness over a slow, soft-focused track that suggests a tough, Southern-steeped Coldplay. With its tight soul bass line, "Stormy Weather" feels like it might turn into a manly soul stomp, but instead, it pensively shimmies into the middle distance as Followill plays the love man in distress.

Throughout, producer Markus Dravs (Coldplay, Mumford & Sons) gives everything a graceful sheen, whether on the soft-rock romance "Claire & Eddie" or the moody "Supermarket," with its molten goth bass line and lyrics that start as an invite to chill and end as a dream of getting clean and "whole again."

Turns out these guys can revel in ambiguity just as fully as they once reveled in their youth and young manhood. **R**



BREAKING

Celeste is England's Newest Soul Queen

RISEING STAR Celeste's debut album, *Not Your Muse*, has been a long time coming. Since releasing her first single, "Daydreaming," in 2016, she's been winning praise from the likes of Elton John and Billie Eilish and getting compared to Adele. *Not Your Muse* delivers on the promise, veering between hazy disco tunes and syrupy ballads with ease, thanks to her dreamy, smoky voice. Upbeat songs like "Tonight Tonight" and "Love Is Back" are sweet retro steppers full of attitude and funk. The best moments show off her powerful range, like the twinkling, wintry "A Little Love" and the sublime highlight "A Kiss." **BRITTANY SPANOS**

FROM TOP: MATTHEW FOLLOWILL; ELIZAVETA PORODINA

Quick Hits

Ten new albums you need to know about now



Valerie June

The Moon and Stars: Prescriptions for Dreamers

Fantasy



RISING JUNE This stunning song cycle of redemption and reclamation adds an orchestral-pop sheen to June's gorgeous blend of astral folk and meditative Memphis R&B.

★★★★★

Adult Mom

Driver

Epitaph



COOL MOM Stevie Nipe's latest is a vivid queer-love coming-of-age tale told over melodies that evoke classic R.E.M. in their careful midsummer beauty and gathering warmth.

★★★★★

Ian Sweet

Show Me How You Disappear

Polyvinyl



SUPER SWEET Jilian Medford's third LP aims for the cosmos but lands in an indie-pop *Twilight Zone*, spinning a web of confessional lyrics, distorted riffs, and glittery hooks.

★★★★★

Loretta Lynn

Still Woman Enough

Legacy



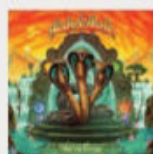
COUNTRY QUEEN Lynn goes toe-to-toe with Tanya Tucker and Margo Price on stripped-down versions of her hits, sounding as tough as ever and reaffirming her badass credentials.

★★★★★

Tash Sultana

Terra Firma

Mom + Pop



SULTANA SWINGS The Australian multi-instrumentalist tones down the guitar wizardry of previous releases to show off her formidable pop chops as she glides through jazz, folk, and R&B.

★★★★★

Slowthai

Tyron

Method



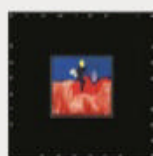
RAP REBEL The U.K. rapper follows his striking 2019 debut, *Nothing Great About Britain*, with an equally bracing set of lyrically sharp tracks like the politically charged "NHS."

★★★★★

Django Django

Glowing in the Dark

Because



PSYCH SPREE "We're free from gravity," these psych-poppers inform us; their fourth LP is a pile of cool, trippy ideas, the music often seems to float away before giving you much to grasp onto.

★★★★★

Clap Your Hands Say Yeah

New Fragility

CYHSY



CLAP IT UP Alec Ounsworth delivers a song cycle inspired by David Foster Wallace. His warbled ballads are teeth pulls, but his crisp, catchy alt-pop zone outs remain undeniable.

★★★★★

Pale Waves

Who Am I?

Dirty Hit



GOTH SLOG These lovelorn English cliché jockeys offer a clunky mix of late-Nineties easy listening and 2000s emo pop — like Natalie Imbruglia via Paramore, and not in a good way.

★★★☆☆

Rob Zombie

The Lunar Injection Kool Aid Eclipse Conspiracy

Nuclear Blast



SCARY BAD New Rob Zombie albums are as lame and predictable as the D-grade fright flicks he worships. His new one offers the same disco-metal dreck he's been peddling for 30 years.

★★★☆☆

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THERE'S
revolution

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FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: JOSEPH OKPAKO/WIREIMAGE; TAYLOR HILL/GETTY IMAGES; JOHN SHEARER/WIREIMAGE; PYMCA/AV/ALON/GONZALES PHOTO/CHRISTIAN HJORTH/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP/GETTY IMAGES

CONTRIBUTORS: JONATHAN BERNSTEIN, JON DOLAN, JON FREEMAN, KORY GROW, JEFF IHAZA, ANGIE MARTOCCIO



ESSAY

Imagining Women Outside the Box

The 'strong female character' has come a long way – but she's got a few miles still to go

By NAHNATCHKA KHAN

Audiences want to see their experiences reflected back at them on television.

Audiences want to see aspirational stories on television.

People don't like to feel challenged, they want escapist entertainment.

People want to feel challenged, they don't want to waste time watching fluff.

THESE ARE JUST A FEW of the cherished maxims that TV executives have been throwing around the halls of development for decades. And my personal favorite, as a working writer-producer for many years: *You know what this show needs? A strong female character.*

It's not clear when "strong female character" became a box to tick off on the development checklist, but the breakout success of *Roseanne* in 1988 might have had something to do with it. Here was a woman who was the center of her family, who didn't look or sound like the star of a TV show "should." She wasn't trying to make herself smaller to avoid ruffling feathers, and she truly embraced the meaning of the phrase "tough love." Above all else, she felt real, like women you actually know.

She was also a tough act to follow. The inevitable knockoffs trotted out after something succeeds never work, because people can sense the inauthenticity. In order to emulate the spirit of what audiences are responding to but not the letter, you have to really commit to the idea, to delivering on the promise of the premise. Otherwise, "strong female character" becomes an empty – and lazy – phrase used to describe any woman who is central to a show. Once, when I questioned this choice of words in reference to a particular character,

FREE TO BE YOU AND ME

Iconic but hemmed-in characters like Lucy Ricardo and Carrie Bradshaw have given way to *Euphoria's* Rue, *I May Destroy You's* Arabella, and *The Good Place's* Eleanor.

an exec said to me, "Of course she's a strong female character – her name is in the title!"

Obviously, as societal and cultural attitudes have evolved, so has the idea of what a strong woman is. Consider *I Love Lucy*, which premiered 70 years ago. Looking back through a 2021 lens does a disservice to what a series like that meant at the time – a prime-time showcase for a very talented female comedian, on one of only three networks (!) for viewers to turn to. But it is 2021, so we can't completely ignore the premise: A housewife who just wants to get into show business has to go around her unsupportive husband – who is in show business – to try to get a foot in the door despite him. Lucy Ricardo was a trailblazer, for sure, but was she strong?

How are we even defining the strength we want to see in our female characters? Is it someone who's a badass? No-nonsense? A bitch? For a long time, in order to be considered strong, the prevalent thinking was that women needed to act like men.

PHOTOGRAPHS USED IN ILLUSTRATION, FROM TOP: GETTY IMAGES; CBS PHOTO ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES; EDDY CHEN/HBO; NATALIE SEERY/HBO; COLLEEN HAYES/NBC

Maude and Murphy Brown were two of TV's brassiest, most outspoken women, and each paid the price for it in some ways. Initially created as a foil for Archie Bunker in *All in the Family*, Maude (played by the amazing Bea Arthur) was a proud feminist, a so-called limousine liberal. But it felt like she was crafted strictly as the anti-Archie, so audiences could laugh at both and take neither seriously. Seeing Candice Bergen's Murphy Brown, a curmudgeonly news anchor fresh out of rehab, stalk through the newsroom in wide shoulder pads was revolutionary even in 1988 – roles like hers had typically been reserved for men. But she also seemed purposely desexualized so that audiences could take her seriously as a career woman. Both of these shows had episodes that caused a national uproar: Maude's decision to have an abortion, and Murphy's decision to become a single mother. The reaction to those storylines showed that the characters were popular enough to elicit passionate reactions – but also that audiences wanted to keep them in familiar boxes.

In the late Nineties, we met Carrie Bradshaw, Ally McBeal, and Felicity. All classic characters, they were single women who didn't rely on men to support them – yet their lives revolved around men anyway, in the pursuit of the “one big love.” Carrie (Sarah Jessica Parker) was a successful writer with fierce female friendships... who obsessed over Mr. Big and made it her six-seasons-and-two-movies mission to get him. Ally McBeal (Calista Flockhart) traded in Murphy Brown's shoulder pads for short skirts, which was groundbreaking in its own way, a declaration that a woman could be sexual *and* good at her job. But she also pined for her married ex-boyfriend and had a habit of seeming like... she didn't exactly know... what she was... doing... all the time? And then there's Felicity (Keri Russell), who followed a dude she liked to college because he wrote something cute in her yearbook. Honestly, no notes on this one. It's Felicity, we love her, leave her alone!

Is the iconic Mary Richards from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* a strong female character, or her modern-day analogue Valerie Cherish (Lisa Kudrow) from *The Comeback*? Their series aired decades apart, but they're both different versions of women trying to make it in a man's world by playing within established rules. Mary was a single woman in a 1970s newsroom, trying to smile and not get sexually harassed while proving she was competent. Thirty-five years later, we had Valerie desperately striving to convince the hostile, male head writer of the terrible sitcom she's on that she's actually a good actress.

All of these examples demonstrate progress in representation – and problems with it, too (including a glaring lack of diversity). Thankfully, in the past decade, there's been a seismic shift in the fullness of female depictions on TV. The now well-known industry disruptors – the streaming platforms, led by Netflix – have created an unprecedented demand for content, and with it, opportunities for new storytellers. If the arc of television history

has been long, there's recently been a sharp spike in imagination, which has given us Issa Dee (Issa Rae), the everywoman struggling to find her path in *Insecure*; Arabella (Michaela Coel), the internet-famous author confronting trauma in *I May Destroy You*; Sister Night (Regina King), the perp-beating renegade cop from *Watchmen*; basically all of the women of *Orange Is the New Black*; and more complicated versions of white female characters, like Pamela Adlon's Sam Fox, the divorced mom trying to keep it together in *Better Things*, or Eleanor Shellstrop (Kristen Bell), the self-described “Arizona trash bag” of *The Good Place*.

What the success of these characters shows is that not only is it OK for a woman to be all of the things, but that viewers *want* to see them be all of the things. Strength is no longer defined by a single quality or drive, but rather by the degree to which a woman is allowed to be complicated, to be fully realized and deeply flawed. Take Rue (Zendaya), the newly sober teenager at the center of HBO's *Euphoria*. She struggles from beginning to end of Season One, ultimately giving in to her addictions. But she also has a clear point of view. She's “strong” because she is “weak” – she's human.

Netflix's animated trip through adolescence, *Big Mouth*, offers us the hormonal tweens Missy and Jessi (voiced by Ayo Edebiri and Jessi Klein), acknowledging that the horrors of puberty are not solely a male experience. It can be just as terrifying and funny through the eyes of girls. Hulu's *High Fidelity*, meanwhile, took a white, male lead played by John Cusack in the 2000 film and transformed him into Zoë Kravitz's Rob Brooks, similarly probing her failed relationships.

These characters all have a new element that might not be apparent at first: self-awareness. *High Fidelity* can be described as a show about a woman searching for love, sure; but instead of looking outward – “Why can't I meet a man?” – Rob is looking inward, asking questions about herself. Jessi manifests a “hormone monster” because she has so many questions about what she's going through. Arabella is quite literally looking back at her life, at a specific night, trying to parse out the intersection of liberation and exploitation. Sam Fox might seem like a typical overworked single mom; a closer look reveals a woman who isn't trying to find a man to make her household complete, but trying to raise three young women to be just as flawed and strong as she is, and her own mother was before her.

Maybe someday we can do away with the phrase “strong female character” altogether – we'll know we've achieved parity when the gender signifier is no longer needed to quantify a woman's strength. Or perhaps the true mark of a strong female character is a woman who's not defined against anything other than what she is. Someone who's allowed to just be. Like women you actually know. **R**

NAHNATCHKA KHAN is an Emmy nominee and showrunner whose work includes ABC's “Don't Trust the B**** in Apartment 23,” “Fresh Off the Boat,” and NBC's upcoming “Young Rock.”



TV'S REAL LEADING LADIES

These legendary producers changed the game from behind the scenes

Lucille Ball

Helped invent the multicam sitcom format and the idea of recording shows for syndication. Her Desilu studio later produced *Star Trek* and *The Untouchables*.

Agnes Nixon

The queen of daytime drama, she created *All My Children*, *One Life to Live*, and *Loving*, after writing for *Guiding Light*, *As the World Turns*, and more.

Shonda Rhimes

She built a pulpy empire at ABC with series like *Grey's Anatomy*, *How to Get Away With Murder*, and more, before a deal with Netflix made her TV's highest-paid showrunner.

COMING TO A SMALL SCREEN NEAR YOU

Three brand-new series we're excited to check out this month

Generation

HBO Max, March 11th



Lena Dunham was an extremely precocious 25 years old when she made the culture-shaking first season of *Girls*.

As if to prove a point about 25 not really being all that young to lead a TV show, she now serves as one of the producers on this new half-hour series created by 18-year-old Zelda Barnz and her father, Daniel Barnz (*Cake*), who also directs. Daughter and father turn their gaze on a group of SoCal teens (played by, among others, Justice Smith, Chase Sui Wonders, Chloe East, and Uly Schlesinger) grappling with sexuality, school lockdowns, and all the other travails of contemporary high schoolers.

The Falcon and the Winter Soldier

Disney+, March 19th

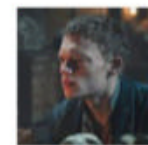


Marvel Studios follows the sitcom-history shenanigans of *WandaVision* with a much more straightfor-

ward-sounding spinoff of the *Avengers* films. This one tracks the further adventures of Falcon (Anthony Mackie) and Bucky (Sebastian Stan), as well as other MCU characters like *Captain America: Civil War* villain Baron Zemo (Daniel Brühl), S.H.I.E.L.D. agent Sharon Carter (Emily VanCamp), and mercenary Batroc (Georges St-Pierre). New on the scene: Wyatt Russell as John Walker, who in the comics briefly — and badly — attempted to succeed Steve Rogers as Captain America.

The Irregulars

Netflix, March 26th



In a handful of Sherlock Holmes stories, the master detective calls in the aid of a group of local street urchins

dubbed the Baker Street Irregulars, who act as his eyes and ears on the streets of London. This young-adult drama reimagines the relationship as one where the Irregulars are actually solving all the mysteries, while Holmes (Henry Lloyd-Hughes) is a drug addict (hey, he does use cocaine in the books) and Dr. Watson (Royce Pierreson) is far less altruistic than he appears, on the page or in previous adaptations. **ALAN SEPINWALL**



Kaluuya as
Black Panther
Party chair
Fred Hampton

Movies

THE KILLING OF A POLITICAL ICON

Judas and the Black Messiah retells Fred Hampton's rise – and the story of the man who helped the FBI murder him



K. AUSTIN COLLINS

SHAKA KING'S *Judas and the Black Messiah* begins and ends with its Judas, a man named William O'Neal (LaKeith Stanfield). The so-called tragic messiah is Fred Hampton (Daniel Kaluuya): founder of the multicultural political organization known as the Rainbow Coalition and the chairman of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panthers, until his 1969 assassination by the FBI. Unlike Hampton, O'Neal is not a household name. Yet.

King's film opens by re-staging an infamous moment from the second *Eyes on the Prize* docuseries, in which O'Neal gave his first and only recorded interview. The former car thief and experienced criminal talks to the camera about how he joined the Black Panther Party in Chicago and, quickly falling into Hampton's good graces, became the head of his security. Soon, O'Neal will also become an informant for the FBI. The raid that will claim Hampton's life was the direct result of that collaboration, down to the details that O'Neal provided about the layout of the house where Hampton, his fiancée, and fellow Panthers were staying that evening.

The film is, wisely, not a biopic. It doesn't trace the full lives, the respective rises and falls, of these men from beginning to end. Nor is it a robust history of the Black Panther Party in itself. It's almost entirely concerned with the period of O'Neal's double duty – which is to say, the last stretch of Hampton's life. (O'Neal would remain an informant for some years after Hampton's killing; once

this was exposed, he had to go into witness protection.) On this tragic canvas, the film paints a complex picture of Hampton's levitating rhetoric (which Kaluuya, stocky and sensational, delivers with power and aplomb). He's adamant that he should not be the center of attention; it's black lives, the lives of the race and class proletariat broadly, that should be the focus of the movement.

The appeal and achievement of King's film is in the undercurrents about Hampton's politics and lifestyle (which, as the film deftly illustrates, cannot be disentangled: the man lived his beliefs), about the Panthers' community work and the police state's utter resistance to it, and about the two men of

its title: Judas. Messiah. With a title like that, who needs plot? King's muscular, eventful, and wonderfully acted film is built on contrasts like these, whether it's between the FBI (populated by G-Men played by the likes of Jesse Plemons, with Martin Sheen as J. Edgar Hoover himself) and the Panthers, or between a world in which black lives have a value worth risking one's life for and a world in which the fight for those lives is itself valueless.

It's not that we ought to forgive O'Neal, nor even really that we owe it to him or ourselves to "understand" him. It's a depiction whose central idea is the inevitable soul-rot of the Judas. And Stanfield, who, like Kaluuya, offers a standout performance, would be much less compelling without the broad and extraordinary cast of supporting actors drawing out these tensions and differences. What a bench: Dominique Fishback (as Hampton's fiancée, Akua Njeri nee Deborah Johnson), Ashton Sanders, Dominique Thorne, Algee Smith, Robert Longstreet, Terayle Hill, and a brief but wonderful bit from Lil Rel Howery. And though the roles for women here are mighty (more Thorne, please!), the depictions don't do justice to how numerous and robust they were in real life.

That may be the central shortcoming: *Judas and the Black Messiah* does so much, so tightly, and so well, that it makes you that much more aware of the nuances and essences it necessarily overlooks. The formation of the Rainbow Coalition almost feels too easy: Hampton walks into a gathering of poor whites with a Confederate flag hanging and wins them over within (in movie time) minutes; class-, race-, and big-picture-related conflict is conspicuously tamped down. And the true extent of O'Neal's past as a criminal before the FBI catches him is intriguingly minimized, in ways that make it easy – perhaps too easy – to feel sympathy for the man. The film can't do everything. But what it does is quite something. ®



Director
Shaka
King

★★★★★ Classic | ★★★★ Excellent | ★★★ Good | ★★ Fair | ★ Poor

ALL THAT JAZZ

The United States vs. Billie Holiday

STARRING
Andra Day
Trevante Rhodes

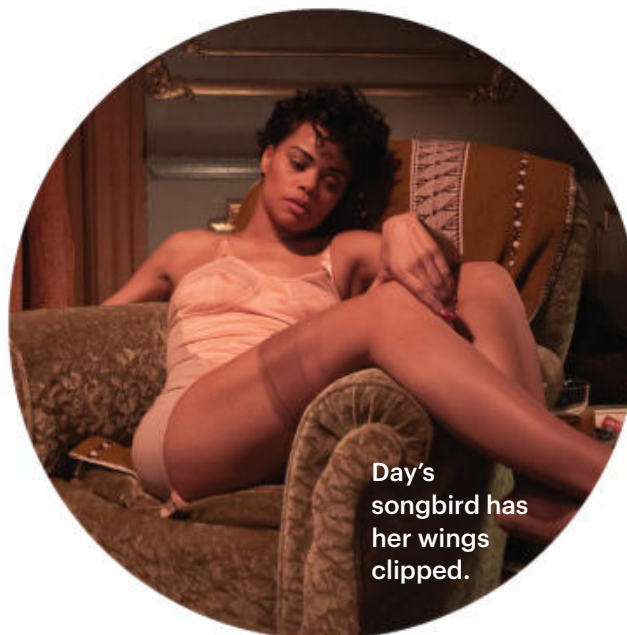
DIRECTED BY
Lee Daniels

★★☆☆☆

THE “VERSUS” suggests there’s a battle at stake – and there is. Billie Holiday (a charismatic Andra Day) is filling concert halls and pissing off government officials with her song “Strange Fruit.” It’s a cri de coeur that openly mourns both the injustice of lynchings and the American political system’s utter disinterest in doing anything about them. So, she’s got to go. And the woman’s own follies, addictions, and weaknesses become the key to silencing her. Cue Jimmy Fletcher (*Moonlight*’s Trevante Rhodes), a black FBI agent – one of the agency’s earliest – whose job is to be the feds’ eyes and ears in Harlem and, eventually, to keep an eye on Lady Day.

The film’s got a stacked deck of a supporting cast, including Natasha Lyonne (as Tallulah Bankhead), Rob Morgan, and the great Da’Vine Joy. The script is credited to the equally dynamic, prize-winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, whose portrayals of the black women undone and done wrong by history and representation are vexed, discomfiting, confrontational.

If you’re looking for a film with any historical curiosity about Holiday, however, well, keep



looking. Director Lee Daniels’ look at the lady singing the blues is many things, but a requisite portrait of this period in the singer’s life, or the urgent circumstances of this song, it is not. Instead, we get a reductive, mismanaged affair full of dangerous tropes, bad writing, questionable thematic emphases and – coming from a director who is usually dependably brash – a dutiful, pervasive dullness. We get heroin trips, abusive men, all pain, no gain, no reprieve, and insight least of all. We get the kind of depiction that sells her short – sells history short. What we don’t get is a study of a troubled woman whose political commitment to her song is hounded by the state; we simply get a portrait of the troubles themselves. For so many reasons, in so many ways, it didn’t need to be this way. K.A.C.

WAR AND PIECES

Cherry

STARRING
Tom Holland
Ciara Bravo

DIRECTED BY
Joe Russo
Anthony Russo

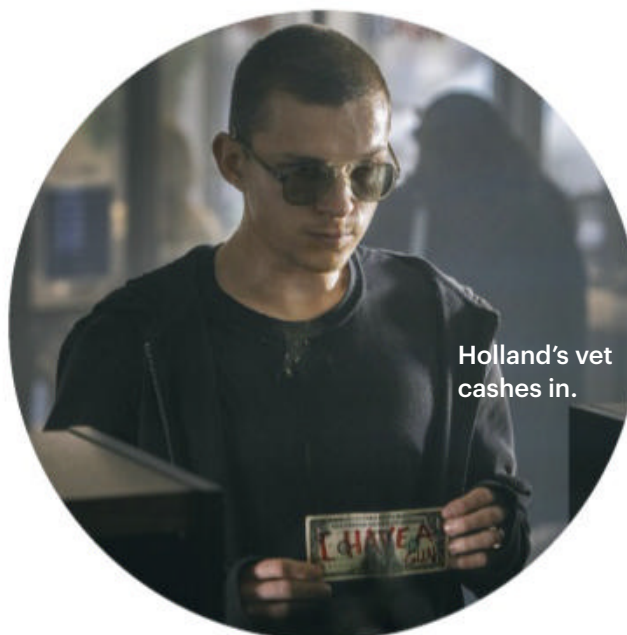
★★☆☆☆

appeal for Joe and Anthony Russo of adapting Nico Walker’s 2018 autobiographical novel. Tell someone you’re making a film that combines a youthful romance, a bloody war story (including the traumatized aftermath), opiate addiction, a streak of bank robberies, and a prison sentence into one story, and they’ll likely tell you you’re doing too much. Fall into the trap of treating each of these segments like its own separate movie, as the *Avengers: Endgame* directors do, and you likely are.

It isn’t that Holland isn’t good; it’s that the talented young actor still comes off far too green and implausible for this medley of storylines. The entire movie comes off as if it were done by overzealous, Criterion-obsessed filmmakers, all shifting aspect ratios, unjustified assaults on the fourth wall, zany drug-use sequences, and booming war-is-hell scenes.

TOM HOLLAND

is Cherry, a college kid turned Army medic turned opiate addict turned serial bank robber (the film doesn’t track the turn to best-selling author) – and given all those turns of events, you can see the



It has one good moment: a catastrophic moral climax in which Cherry is forced to pick between taking a man to the hospital or letting him die. You can predict what he chooses. But the ugly, brutish, desperation of that choice rings loud and clear, where the film overall is just loud. And any goodwill is scrubbed away by the ending, in which an 11-year prison stint is summarized in a wordless, cloying, pan-tastic montage that bypasses all sense of character. Walker’s bestseller about a man plumbing his depths was a son of *Jesus’ Son*. The power of that story has been abandoned by the movie, no matter how eagerly Cherry tries to convince us otherwise. K.A.C.



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➔ ANTI-VAXXERS

[Cont. from 29] conspiracy theories since the 1990s. He argues that conspiracy belief helps conquer anxiety by giving people a feeling of “I understand what’s happening in the world. I have a narrative that explains things.” They also root free-floating fear in something that feels solid: “‘The reason I’m feeling anxious is there’s a secret cabal doing something terrible. And now I’ve identified it.’” A reinforcing factor is “a certain narcissism,” he says. “The conspiracy theory gives them a sense of special knowledge: ‘I know something that’s going on that nobody else does.’ It feels empowering to them.”

A paradox of conspiracy theories is that they’re not full flights of fancy. They involve imagined and invented connections between real people, phenomena, and events. There’s a structure to the irrational belief. “Conspiracy theories are not the product of a disordered mind; they’re the product of an overly ordered mind,” insists Zuckerman. “Conspiracy theories happen when you have an enormous need for order in a disordered universe.” Zuckerman quit his post at MIT in protest of the university’s links to disgraced sex-criminal financier Jeffrey Epstein and now teaches at University of Massachusetts, Amherst. “I do not subscribe to the theory that Epstein was killed in prison,” he says, but points to the myriad conspiracy theories surrounding Epstein as a case in point: “Having a genuine villain out there is really important for conspiracies to root themselves sufficiently in reality so that we continue to pay attention to them.”

This search for order has taken millions of Americans to a dark place – the nihilistic worldview of QAnon. The QAnon belief system is a crossover between a conspiracy theory and a religious cult, and its ideology takes strands of many past conspiracies and weaves them into a big tent where priors are welcome and almost any theory can find safe harbor.

The core of Q is familiar. It posits that the surface world of respectable politicians, well-intentioned government institutions, and a media seeking to hold them accountable, is an illusion. The real power in the world is wielded by shadowy power brokers in the government, Hollywood, and the media called “the cabal” or the “deep state.” QAnon takes this conspiratorial boilerplate to wild extremes. The “deep state” is alleged to be insatiable in its thirst for power, and willing to do anything – from launching wars to spreading pestilence – to move closer to global domination. The Q ideology has no room for subtlety. The conspirators are believed to be the embodiment of evil, actual “luciferians” and pedophiles.

The theory may sound lunatic, but QAnon is no longer relegated to the fringe: A Civiqs tracking poll finds that even after the attack on the Capitol, 10 percent of Republicans describe themselves as “supporters” of QAnon. Tenets of the Q belief system are even more widely held: An NPR poll released at the end of 2020 found 17 percent of Americans rated as “true” the statement that: “A group of Satan-worshipping elites who run a child sex ring are trying to control our politics and media.”

In the Q mythology, the heroes fighting to expose the deep state include an alleged intelligence officer, known as Q, for the “Q-level” clearance he or she is alleged to hold. The conspiracy has elements of a massive role-playing game. For years, the anonymous “Q” dropped cryptic hints or “crumbs” on message boards like 8chan and 8kun, which QAnon adherents then sought to “bake” into coherent nar-

ratives about coming events. The community also revered Donald Trump as a lonely fighter, seeking to undermine, arrest, and vanquish the deep state.

HOW DID THE anti-vax movement – which thrives in far-left communities like Portland, L.A., and Marin County, California – get mixed up with a quasi-religious cult that held up Donald Trump as its savior? “It was very surprising to see the anti-vax community cross the streams” with QAnon, says Zuckerman. “Anti-vaxxers are people who often identify as leaning politically left. They often come to this stance because they’re anti-corporate, and they’re really concerned about Big Pharma making money.”

American political ideology is most often conceptualized as a straight line running from left to right. But an alternate visualization presents the spectrum instead as a horseshoe, where the left and right extremes bend back toward one another. Conspiracy theories can bridge these far ends like a powerful electric spark.

Oliver’s research has shown that openness to conspiracy theory is correlated to intuitive thinking over evidence-based thinking. Conspiratorial beliefs take hold in people who make gut-level decisions and place disproportionate weight on symbolic costs. He offers a questionnaire that helps tease out the personality trait.

- Would you rather: Stab a photograph of your family five times with a sharp knife? Or stick your hand in a bowl of live cockroaches?
- Would you rather: Sleep in laundered pajamas once worn by Charles Manson? Or pick a nickel off the ground and put it in your mouth?
- Would you rather: Grind your heels into an unmarked grave? Or stand in line for three hours at the DMV?

A person avoiding actions with high symbolic costs (stabbing a family photo, sleeping in Manson’s PJs), he says, “is a very strong predictor of believing in conspiracy theories – regardless of where they are on the ideological spectrum.”

Oliver points out that conservative religious Americans – “evangelical or orthodox communities” – tend to have very high intuitionism scores, and receptivity to conspiracy theory. But so do New Age communities associated with the American left. “People who believe in conspiracy theories also believe that GMOs are bad,” he says. “They tend to like organic food or natural health remedies.”

The leap from anti-vax theories to QAnon is less mysterious, Zuckerman says, when you “think about how lonely it is to be an anti-vaxxer. You have the small group of friends who are willing to listen to you talk about mercury in vaccines,” he says. “But suddenly you have a whole group of people” in QAnon adherents “who say, ‘Oh, yeah, not just this, but did you know about this?’ You may be willing to go further, and say, ‘Sure I’ll buy this next part of the conspiracy.’” Finding such affirmation and community in the unreal, he says, makes it easy to surrender your hold on fact-based beliefs. “Red-pilling,” he says, “is when you move from your origin conspiracy theory to this full-conspiracy worldview.”

The anti-vax and Q movements began to merge with the release of a viral video last May. “We saw it in earnest around *Plandemic*,” says Zuckerman. *Plandemic* is the project of Mikki Wills, a 53-year-old self-described “investigative filmmaker” with

piercing blue eyes and a salt-and-pepper goatee, who works from the coastal California enclave of Ojai, halfway between Santa Barbara and Los Angeles.

Willis is politically liberal and his bio touts him as “a virtuoso of positive energy.” He tells *ROLLING STONE* that he was inspired to shoot *Plandemic* because of his concern over the Trump administration’s Operation Warp Speed. “The idea that [the] administration was going to rush an experimental vaccine to market, then have it distributed to the masses by way of the U.S. military,” Willis says, “felt insane and reckless at best. I felt compelled to shine a little light on it.”

The slickly produced 26-minute video centers on discredited former federal scientist Judy Mikovits, whom Willis platforms as an Erin Brokovich-style whistleblower. Mikovits claims without evidence that her career was derailed by a federal conspiracy directed by Anthony Fauci. And she makes myriad wild, false, and unsubstantiated claims, including that the coronavirus was released from a lab and that mask wearing causes illness. The film baselessly insinuates that Fauci, Gates, and others have enormous financial interests in the pandemic. In one key exchange, Willis poses to Mikovits: “If we activate mandatory vaccines globally, I imagine these people stand to make hundreds of billions of dollars that own the vaccines.”

The film was roundly debunked, including by *Science*, which said in part: “*Science* fact-checked the video. None of these claims are true.” Major social media companies banned the video, but not before it was viewed millions of times. Willis insists he’s “absolutely not” a conspiracy theorist and knows “very little” about QAnon. But his video became a cause célèbre among the Q set. “In many ways, *Plandemic* is much more of an anti-vax video than it is a QAnon video,” Zuckerman says. But it fits with the nihilistic Q worldview that elites are not simply misguided or incompetent, but so evil as to unleash a global pandemic and then seek to profit from a vaccine. “The Q community loves it. Right?”

The film hit the bull’s-eye of what Bratich describes as the overlapping “Venn diagram of the anti-vax movement and QAnon.” At the margins, he says, anti-vaxxers have long feared there exists a dark agenda behind inoculations, and these people have found in QAnon a “ready-made, tight narrative – it’s about the great reset, it’s about a new world order, it’s about Bill Gates – that explains the vaccinations.”

THE FULL CONVERGENCE of the anti-vax movement and QAnon belief can be seen in the trajectory of Larry D. Cook – a onetime healthy-lifestyle guru who became a high-profile anti-vaccine activist before he red-pilled, choosing to anchor his beliefs in the open harbor of QAnon.

Cook is 56 but looks perhaps a decade younger. He has a lanky runner’s build and an open, calm, somewhat flat affect when he speaks. He has made his home in Los Angeles for the past 15 years, and a profile picture on his personal website shows him beaming at a farmers market, holding aloft a bunch of kale in each hand.

In 2005, Cook wrote *The Beginner’s Guide to Natural Living*, touting the optimal conditions to express “the divine intelligence flowing through us.” He describes having become a vegan in 1990 and preaches the virtues of organic food, yoga, and alternative healing. There are seeds of distrust in Cook’s writing: He encourages readers to “question toxic medicine” that “makes more money by keeping us slight-

ly sick.” But little in Cook’s rhetoric would have been out of place in a left-coast magazine like *Mother Jones* from the same era. He urges caution of “mainstream media . . . owned and controlled by its advertisers,” and of a government that can be “hoodwinked into allowing harmful products onto the market.”

Cook’s career path is nontraditional. He jumped from “being a sound guy in Hollywood” to a gig as executive director of the California Naturopathic Doctors Association. Cook did not respond to interview requests but told a radio interviewer that his fear of vaccines took root when he was researching a book about attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder and “came across some information that mercury in vaccines cause autism.” As a side gig around 2010, he started creating YouTube videos interviewing doctors who pushed the thimerosal hypothesis and parents whose children were allegedly harmed by vaccines.

The hobby would become a calling, and a conviction, for Cook in 2015, when California proposed ending the personal-belief exemption from public-school vaccination requirements. Cook started a site called Stop Mandatory Vaccination to oppose this and future legislation and describes how this anti-vax activism got him “fired” from his executive-director post and led to his becoming a full-time activist. “I found my voice,” he said. The deeper he dove into the anti-vax world, the more distrustful Cook became, decrying what he calls the “cover up” of children who die after being vaccinated as “a medical mafia conspiracy.” (No serious science suggests vaccination is secretly killing kids.) In 2016, Cook voted for Trump, he explains in a recent court document, because of Trump’s own claims that vaccines were linked to autism.

To popularize his anti-vax beliefs, Cook came up with a “system,” which involved raising money on GoFundMe to pay for alarming Facebook ads that he’d target at young mothers. “I was doing things in a certain way,” Cook explained. “Grabbing attention of parents and driving them into my Facebook group, where they could get their questions answered.” The idea was to spur the young moms to “go anti-vaccine. . . . Once they learn the truth,” he said, “they become activists.” A 2019 study by the journal *Vaccine* revealed that Cook was second only to Kennedy in promoting anti-vax sentiment on Facebook. “Many advertisements featured stories of infants allegedly harmed by vaccines,” the study reports, “using tag lines like, ‘Healthy 14 week old infant gets 8 vaccines and dies within 24 hours.’”

The social media giant didn’t have qualms about taking tens of thousands of dollars from Cook to promote the outrageous claim that vaccines kill babies until it was called out in a letter by Rep. Adam Schiff, who demanded information from Mark Zuckerberg in February 2019 about the company’s practice of monetizing and promoting misinformation about vaccines. Facebook soon tweaked its algorithms to stop recommending anti-vax content, which was instead downgraded on the platform. The move decimated Cook’s online reach from 2 million views a month to about 100,000. Facebook also turned off his ability to advertise on the site. YouTube likewise demonetized his channel.

This throttling by social media giants only appears to have pushed Cook further away from the mainstream. As he described his own conversion, in February 2020, Cook read a QAnon book titled *Calm Before the Storm* that opened his mind to the Q worldview. And he “red-pilled,” as he described in an hour-long video posted last July, in which he appears

flanked by a giant Q in one corner and an American flag underscored with the hashtag #WWG1WGA – short for the Q battle cry of “Where We Go One We Go All!” – in the other.

Cook described how discovering QAnon suddenly gave him a context for his distrust of mainstream medicine and his sense of being persecuted and silenced by social media. “When you wrap your head around the idea that it’s the deep state that is facilitating the vaccine mandates,” he said, “all of a sudden it makes complete sense.”

Cook cast mandatory vaccinations as just one expression of the deep state’s “luciferian” agenda of “controlling everyone on the planet.” The mandates are “all part of the deep-state plan,” he claimed, because “when you inject poison into someone, you can incapacitate them very quickly, especially if you’re doing it at birth . . . as soon as a soul comes in – incarnates.” He called vaccination of children a “deliberate assault designed to suppress their consciousness, designed to shut off their connection to God.” But there’s hope, he insists: “If you take the deep state down completely, we take down the vaccine mandates.”

Through the same jaundiced lens, Cook sees the coronavirus pandemic as part of the deep state’s sinister plot: “It’s a plandemic,” he said, borrowing Willis’ coinage. “It was planned, it’s a false flag. . . . Q would say these people are sick. They want complete control of our planet . . . And if that means killing . . . millions of people, they could care less.”

For Cook, as for most QAnon adherents, the fight is overtly political. “Democrats are lockstep with the deep state,” he insisted. “Our role is to educate the rest of humanity . . . who’s on the side of justice and truth and who’s on the side of God.” The good guys, for Cook, are Trump and the “Q Team.” And he celebrates the promise of redemption: “You shut down the deep state and we can have heaven on Earth,” he said, adding: “We are in the throes of the final battles.”

THE ATTACK ON THE CAPITOL on January 6th was a wake-up call for America that online conspiracy theories and QAnon’s nihilism are a serious threat not just to the mental health of individual believers but also to innocent life, not to mention the functioning of our democratic government.

The mass delusion of conspiracy-theory belief also constitutes a public-health crisis. As the WHO put it last fall, an “infodemic” is “endangering countries’ ability to stop the pandemic,” adding that “misinformation costs lives,” and that a lack of trust in science will cause immunization campaigns to “not meet their targets, and the virus will continue to thrive.”

Public-health experts say the addictive appeal of conspiracy theories has left them exasperated, but with few solutions. “I really had this mental model,” Jha says, that “you get the evidence, you speak it in plain, simple terms, and share with people what is true – and that’s it. Like, you win the game,” he says. “I have learned very much the hard way, from April on, that that is just naive.”

In January, a mob of anti-vax protesters briefly shut down a mass inoculation site at Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles, holding up signs like “COVID=SCAM,” “Don’t be a lab rat,” and “Tell Bill Gates to Vaccinate Himself!” The inability to respond effectively to this kind of mass delusion, Jha says, is a “huge liability in the public-health community. We should try to engage with people,” he insists. “But it is not done by giving them facts. They’re not actually lacking in facts; they don’t believe.”

Zuckerman says the core obstacle with QAnon is that its doctrine of blanket distrust leaves few avenues for intervention: “‘Scientists? Oh, they’re all at universities; they’re all part of the deep state. What about the media? Oh, my God. The media actually run the deep state.’ That’s epistemic closure,” he says.

Social media companies that had profited from allowing such conspiracies to run riot, have recently booted QAnon and anti-vaxxers from their platforms. But that also creates problems, says Bratich. “It’s just riled up the radical emerging right that sees themselves as being not just censored, but persecuted,” he says. This brings with it notions of a “dangerous self-sacrifice and martyrdom” and risks “more conflagrations before it subsides.”

Shortly after the election, Cook found himself completely de-platformed. In mid-November, he was kicked off Facebook as part of the social network’s purge of QAnon. Twitter shut down his account simultaneously. Cook has attempted to launch his own social media properties: Covid-19 Refusers – which features a 14-part video indoctrination on why to reject vaccination – as well as Medical Freedom Patriots: a \$5-a-month, subscription-based group he touts as “Anti Vaccine, Pro Alternative Medicine, QAnon friendly.” Cook makes plain he’s seeking to spread the gospel of QAnon: “We are in an INFORMATION WAR,” he writes. “The first step is for us all to be informed – I am giving you the path to that – and then to share it yourself with others.”

As with many, many Q believers, Trump’s election loss has been hard for Cook to absorb. On December 7th, he posted on Parler that Americans should consider fleeing to “Republican held states” to avoid forced vaccination. “This is war,” he wrote. “We don’t need to be up front getting the kill shots when we know there’s Higher Ground.” In late January, he posted to Telegram his belief that the military would help Trump reseize control of America: “I have now seen enough pieces of the puzzle to believe that *THE PLAN* is in fact going EXACTLY as it was PLANNED to go for our US Military and President Trump to secure the United States of America and thereby *end* the Deep State’s rule over us once and for all,” he wrote. “In fact I do believe it will be BIBLICAL.”

Zuckerman argues that what’s required to reach the far edges of the anti-vax and QAnon communities resembles cult deprogramming. “The question that I think everyone would love to have a definitive answer to is, ‘Can people be unpilled?’” he says. He points with encouragement to forums on Reddit for people who have escaped Q and are trying to help others. “They talk about the incredible damage – that this is a belief system that ends marriages, ends friendships.” Bratich likens these groups to “QAnon recovery” and suggests that “the deprogramming that happens might be as networked and distributed as the way these people [originally] came together.”

But Bratich cautions that the pull of QAnon remains devilishly strong, and that the conspiracy theory has shown itself to be incredibly plastic and adaptable. He warns that as the notion of Trump as superhero fades, the fight against vaccination may well open up as the organizing battle in QAnon’s resistance against the deep state. “If Trump goes away or goes to the margins,” he says, “I think this will be the next thing that becomes front and center.” The far edge of the anti-vax movement, he says, “keeps talking about how the vaccine is ‘the beginning of the end.’ For QAnon there’s a code in there,” he warns. “It’s the beginning of the end of America, right?” 

[Cont. from 34] the traffic circulating through Nashville's low-slung environs.

On the way to producer Daniel Tashian's house to work on her new album, which is set to be released this year, she explains how two days ago she was in the process of sitting with her sadness, listening to Bach's "Komm, süßer Tod, komm selge Ruh," when suddenly the word "tragedy" sprung to mind. This got her thinking about Greek tragedies and the classic three-act narrative, which got her thinking about her divorce and also about the state of America and also about the state of the world at large, locked down and fearful. "This last chapter of my life and this whole last year and chapter for our country – at its most simple form, it's a tragedy," she figured. "And then I started looking into why portraying a tragedy is actually therapeutic and why it is a form of art that has lasted for centuries. It's because you set the scene, the audience rises to the climax of the problem with you, and then there's resolve. There's a feeling of resolution at the end. I was inspired by that."

Soon she was thinking of Romeo and Juliet and the idea of being "star-crossed," and the revelation that, of the 39 songs she'd thus far written over the course of the past few years, she could figure out which ones to use if she structured the album like a tragedy, grouping the songs into acts. Suddenly, the album that had seemed fairly nebulous began to take real shape in her mind. "It's crazy because you have to just wait on it," she says of that moment. "You can't ask for it." The conceptualization also showed her that she still needed one more song, the one that would be the "crescendo of the climax. And that's what we're going to play around with today," she says, rolling the car to a stop in front of a white, brick house.

She finds Tashian and fellow producer Ian Fitchuk – the team also behind *Golden Hour* – in the backyard, sitting around a fire pit, near a trampoline and a plastic slide and a couple of large storage pods, out of which Tashian's wife sells vintage books. In front of the garage, which has been converted to a studio referred to as Royal Plum, there is a tangle of pastel bikes. Placidly moving about all this is a yellow dog named Pippi.

"I freaking hit a car!" Musgraves announces to not an iota of astonishment from the guys. In fairness, they seem of a hippie-dad (Fitchuk) and hipster-dad (Tashian) ilk that may be immune to perturbation. Much of the next few hours is spent chilling around the fire pit, drinking "Tennessee tea" (made with a saucepan of water and chamomile flowers over the open flame, then sweetened with honey) as the conversation meanders from the CBD gummies Musgraves brought (Fitchuk: "Wow, this is so sacramental; I feel blessed to be sharing this") to the ongoing vote on Trump's impeachment (Musgraves: "Upset about Twitter? Imagine Twitter is a Christian bakery refusing gay-wedding service"). At some point, it lands on the concept of being "star-crossed," engendering a lively debate about Calvinism and predestiny and astrology and numerology and the belief that some things are just "misaligned," as Musgraves puts it, "even though your heart and yourself want it to not be the case."

"What you were saying about your experience was you realized there was a peace in that, though," Fitchuk points out. "Realizing that just because somebody doesn't stay physically in your life, romantic-

ly or unromantically, doesn't change your connection or the purpose you serve in each other's lives."

"Right," Musgraves muses. "That it's on such a deep spiritual plane of existence that it almost doesn't even matter that you can't be together in this realm. It's going to live on, you know what I mean? And that it still means something really beautiful."

"The stars are going to do what they're going to do," says Tashian. "I think it's a Shakespearian way of sort of saying 'unlucky.' And I think on another level, a third concept is that some part of ourself knows something, but the other part of ourself doesn't want to admit it. So then we assign the meaning of the causality to these different things."

Musgraves nods: "I mean, it's like seeing red flags, but not wanting to acknowledge them because something else is making you feel good about it." She leans back in her yard chair. "It's interesting."

By the time they move inside the Royal Plum, the group has availed themselves of the Radiooooo app in which one can input a country and a decade and roll the dice on what music comes up (Musgraves: "Can we try Seventies Argentina?" Fitchuk: "Yeah, let's go") and cast about for a tempo that might not be covered by the flowchart of songs drawn out on a piece of poster board. Musgraves plops on the sofa to study it.

"I mean, looking at the list of songs, we have some that venture into, like, a Bill Withers land," she considers. "We've got that synth stuff that we always loved. And we've got some Eagles or America territory. There's a little bit of a dance vibe."

"When you see that title, 'Star-Crossed,'" says Tashian, "you almost want to hear – I don't want to say Coldplay, though I love Chris Martin – but you almost want to hear a bit of an epic kind of feeling. Not tribal, but—"

"Anthemic? Kind of?" Musgraves asks. "Well, OK. 'Star-Crossed' could be the easiest, laziest thing: It could be a ballad. But what if it was an uptempo, sad dance song? What would that be like? Or what if it was kind of that Nineties, midtempo laid-back..."

"Yeah," Tashian ponders, unconvinced. "Yeah."

"Or more of a bossa nova, waltz-type vibe?"

Tashian perks up. "Oooooooh!"

"Wait, we do have a waltz," Musgraves remembers.

"Hmm. We can't have two waltzes. That I know."

"Definitely not."

"It's a waltz album!" Tashian jokes. "It's a *Waltz in the Park!*"

Musgraves laughs. "Imagine if I turned that into the label?"

"OK. We got to chip away at it from the words," he tells her. "'Cause that's what's going to guide us, I think. Here, let me get some real paper for you."

Tashian hands her a spiral-bound notebook. She takes up a bright-green marker. Then she gets to writing.

TODAY, THE PROBLEM is the pool – or it might be the pool, should the pool continue to act as it is wont to. "It's been the bane of my existence," Musgraves had told me. "Like, it's the world's most unrelaxing pool. I might as well be filling it with dollars because it never works."

She's back at her gnome house, again bathed in the morning light. The pool outside the door is set to be heating, but seems to have other ideas, which is a problem because later on this nippy January day a famous photographer is coming to take pictures of Musgraves floating around in it. She doesn't want this photographer to get frostbite. She doesn't want

to get frostbite herself. That would be therapeutic for no one.

"I just want to continue to make healthy choices for myself physically, mentally," she says, perched on the yellow duvet. "Even when the world starts ramping up again, I want to keep the things I've found useful this past year." This means riding her horse more "because that's what makes my soul really happy," doing more pottery, doing more journaling, especially while listening to the Johns Hopkins playlist, which is meant to evoke moments from her trip. It means trying to be OK with the fact that catharsis "is a moving target," and that "doing the right thing just doesn't feel right sometimes." It means recognizing the golden hour never lasts, and that it's always inevitably followed by night. "I'm in a night period," Musgraves had said. "But what's great about that is that next is another light period. It will come again."

In the great pantheon of star-crossed tragedies, none of this is so extraordinary. But watching "Star-Crossed" take shape proved that it could be:

Let me set the scene

Two lovers ripped right at the seams

Woke up from the perfect dream

And then the darkness came

Signed the papers yesterday

You came and took your things away

I moved out of the home we made

And gave you back your name

A simple, crushing story, simply and crushingly told. Tashian's guitar accompaniment had started as a mere fluttering of notes, then grew with Latin-inflected drama. Musgraves had sung the words quietly, her voice like a gossamer thread unspooling. The song ended with an outro, the word "star-crossed" repeated until it trailed off, without resolution. At least, that's how it ended that day; nothing was yet set in stone. "With Kacey, there's a terrific amount of exploration sonically that goes on, searching and searching for new sounds. That hasn't changed," Tashian tells me later about the direction of the new album, especially in relation to *Golden Hour*. "But, you know, these are different phases or different seasons. It's sort of like saying, 'How will spring be different from autumn?'"

Musgraves doesn't even know if she'll tour this next album. The season when she wants to say what it will end up saying might pass, and she's OK with that. The important thing is that she'll have said it. "I mean, it's a therapeutic outlet for me, you know? I can't help but to write about what I'm going through. I want to honor the huge range of emotion that I've felt over this past year, past six months. I also want to honor the relationship we had and the love we have for each other. Because it's very real."

Next week she'll get in the studio with Fitchuk and Tashian and keep figuring out how to do that, how to record the story of her unfolding tragedy in a way that might bring about resolution. She'll surround herself with salt lamps and good energy and maybe some fat joints, and certainly with musicians who feel "almost like my brothers at this point." The songs are all there, in her brain and her Voice Memos app, ready to be actualized. Just in the past day, she'd gotten the idea to have Carlos Santana play on "Star-Crossed," and heard that he may very well be game. So much was possible. There were many paths to healing. Oh, and one more thing: The owner of the Honda had called to report that the scrape was no big deal. She doesn't even like that car anyway. 

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Dionne Warwick

The vocal icon on the joys of Twitter and the advice that guides her

You had a busy 2020, appearing on *The Masked Singer* and participating in a *Verzuz* battle. How else have you been spending your time during the pandemic?

You know what I've been able to do, actually, is sleep. Get as much rest as I want to, or not get up if I don't want to. It's just been a pleasant

Warwick is collaborating with *Chance the Rapper* on a benefit single.

retreat for me for a bit. I've been able to do some other things that have been meaningful for me as well – I've still been able to become involved with charitable organizations. I've been watching a lot of TV, which has been hysterical, because I'm watching shows that I hadn't seen since I was a child, on MeTV.

What kinds of shows have you been watching?

Right now, *Bonanza*, *Perry Mason*, early in the morning. It's been those kinds of shows that I grew up watching, and all of a sudden they're back in my life again.

Even though you're not on the road, you've found a great way to interact with old fans and make new ones, through Twitter. What have you enjoyed most about tweeting?

I've made some new friends in the younger generation, so it's just been a bunch of fun for me. I think it's wonderful, just for the fact that they had discovered that there is a Dionne Warwick,

which is very nice. And to find out that they were aware of me before Twitter, but have become more aware of me and are enjoying me, which is the best part of it all.

One really powerful part about your interactions there is how you've pushed for inclusivity, talking about pronouns for LGBTQ fans, for example. And I know that "That's What Friends Are For" was actually a benefit single for AIDS research. Has it always been a priority for you to connect with your fans who are queer and nonbinary?

I think it's wonderful. I don't look at them any differently than I do any other human being. They're people. I think that is basically the premise of it all, that I care about them as much as I care about anybody else. I have no choice in the matter, basically, because I don't judge people. That's not my thing. You are who you are, and that's what it is.

You've been touring internationally for most of your life. What's your favorite place in the world, and why?

There are many, but if I had to choose, I would say it would have to be Bahia, Brazil. It's just where I found my paradise. It's where I found something that's kind of just disappeared here in the U.S., for me anyway: respecting elders, love of children, and love of the country... things that I was brought up to do, and that we seem to have lost sight of here for some reason. There are moments when I wake up in the morn-



ing wondering, "What country am I really living in?"

Who are your heroes, and why?

The first one would be Barbara Jordan, who was one of the most magnificent congresswomen that ever graced the halls down there in Washington, D.C. I had the pleasure of meeting her. I told her that at that point in time, I was thinking, "Maybe I should become an attorney." She almost talked me into doing that, too. But as it turned out, she said, "You continue to sing, and you can go to law school anytime you want, but you continue to sing, OK?"

What's the best advice you've ever gotten, either in the industry or outside of it?

The best advice in life has been from my family, and I got it from my mentors as well. I hate name-dropping, I really do, but these people were my mentors: Sarah Vaughan, Sammy Davis Jr., Frank Sinatra. They all said basically the same thing to me at a very tender time of the beginning of my career: "Be who you are. You cannot be anyone but you." And I've never forgotten that.

What's the best and worst part of success?

Oh, boy. The best part is bringing joy to people. I guess the worst would be not being able to find that period of time that's solely mine. I'm everybody's person, and I can't and I don't find the time to be me. Now, I must say these past 10 months have been sensational. I got to know me again. **BRITTANY SPANOS**



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